

Special Report

9/11 and the 'second Pearl Harbor'

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August 25, 2004—Booker Elementary School, in Sarasota, Florida, made a videotape on the morning of September 11, 2001. The video is worth a thousand words but so far is accessible mainly on the Internet, and only half the nation's households are online. Since it has not been disseminated and was seldom mentioned in print before Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, most readers will not have seen it. Moore's film does not contain the entire video.

Emma E. Booker Elementary was agog that sunny morning over a visit scheduled by the president [sic] of the United States for an education photo-op. Understandably proud school personnel videotaped Bush from his arrival to his departure, except for a few minutes he spent with his staff preparing the press statement delivered at the end of the visit.

The video contains one image of moment: George W. Bush, sitting in a crowded classroom, receives a quickly whispered message from White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card, apparently about the second strike on the World Trade Center. When Bush hears the news, he remains seated and continues to watch a children's group-reading exercise, leaving the school almost half an hour later.

Watching the video is a bit spooky, partly because it begins like any half-political, half-policy program: opening shots show school posters including one that says "Read to Succeed." Outdoor views show children lined watching for the big event, school personnel and other adults milling around, mounted police on patrol and news media vans filling the driveway. Then come multiple police cars, then the presidential motorcade passing before school buses in the parking lot.

The arrival sequence is followed by the classroom sequence. Bush smilingly enters a second-grade classroom of mostly African-American children, greets the teacher and the children, who stand up when he enters, and poses for photographs with the principal and the teacher, Kay Daniels. After about half a minute, he seats himself left front, watching as the teacher, center front, gears up with instructions and begins the lesson. Other adult visitors are farther left, reporters in back, behind the camera. About two minutes later, Bush turns his head to the left, where apparently Andrew Card approaches off camera. Card walks briskly to Bush, whispers in his ear, and immediately turns to leave. Bush nods slightly but does not speak. Card's total face time with Bush, approach included, comes to four seconds maximum; his message less than two seconds.

Brevity is usually laudable, but this degree of terseness raises questions about our national-emergency plan: why did Card leave the room immediately after delivering his message? How did he know, as he seems to know, that there would be no response? What made him presume, as he seems to do, that Bush would have no commands to transmit or other directions for him?

A prior question is what, precisely, Card said. A truth squad of good lip-readers might discern the message, but the shortness of time obviates any possibility that the chief of staff is saying, "My God, Mr. President [sic], another hijacked jumbo jet has struck the World Trade Center!" Card's demeanor betrays no excitement or agitation.

Eerily, neither does Bush's. With or without audio, the sequence is clear: Card leaves the room; Bush remains seated; after about another minute, he picks up the textbook the children are using and follows while they read aloud. There is one touching element, amidst all the inhumanity: when the children do their quick-reading exercise, more than once Bush almost starts; he seems genuinely and spontaneously impressed by their speed, implicitly corroborating anecdotes that he, like his brother Neil, suffered from childhood reading disabilities.

But in regard to the news about the World Trade Center attack, there is no surprise; no horror; no anger; certainly no grief. This is the salient feature of the Booker Elementary video, not that the children were reading a story about a pet goat, but that the news that would shortly throw the whole world into an uproar threw Bush into none. While the overwhelming majority of Americans were thunderstruck, and goodwill everywhere suffered bitter disappointment and frustration, along with grief, at the setbacks for peace and comity in what felt like—literally—a bolt from the blue, none of this is evident in Bush's reaction.

Instead, for another five to 10 minutes—the exact time is uncertain, because press and White House accounts vary and the video cuts away from the reading lesson—he remains in the classroom, pointing out things in the book and making friendly and supportive remarks to and about the children. A praiseworthy interaction—cheerful, gentle and kind—but in the context, surreal. No spin can be put on Bush's reaction to suggest that it reflects anything frightful or terrible.

His actual facial expression, in moments when he is not speaking, suggests rather suspense or apprehension. Eyes dark, face somewhat more somber than usual, he seems to be sitting in class trying not to draw attention to himself by reacting, getting a plus or at least a check next to his name in the "participates in class discussion" column, waiting to find out whether the principal's office was going to call his mother, the public.

Questions have arisen about when Bush first heard of the strikes, from whom, or in what medium; about why he would refer to the attackers, in early remarks, as "folks"; about why he entered the elementary school in the first place, after hearing of the first attack, when theoretically he and those around him (children) might become targets. Separate accounts have clarified that Bush had indeed heard about the first strike before the photo-op began. Andrew Card's message presumably indicated that the strikes were deliberate.

Obviously, the news was incomplete. Not all four hijackings had occurred, and the full extent of the damage was not known. But even setting aside national security concerns, one can only be mystified by the fundamental emotional puzzle here. Even without knowing about two more hijacked commercial jets, why did a president [sic] remain in an elementary school reading event, after being informed beyond any doubt of a kamikaze strike on the World Trade Center? And why didn't he look more surprised?

Reactions of key personnel also raise questions. What happened to Secret Service procedure? Generally, if a situation arises that might threaten a president, deciding what to do is not left to the man himself; those are the moments when the Secret Service swings into action. Vice President [sic] Cheney described in a later television interview how his feet touched the floor maybe two or three times when the Secret Service hustled him to safety under orders on September 11, as with other members of the first and second families. A Marine guard at Booker, hearing the news from New York that morning, had instantly pronounced, "We're out of here" when Bush arrived. Why weren't they?

Richard Clarke testified to the 9/11 Commission that after National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice made him ad hoc security principal, the president's [sic] flying here and there in evasive maneuvering was on his orders. In other words, protecting the president [sic] seems to have been his idea, rather than that of the White House. The difference between individuals who behaved on 9/11 as one would expect them to in an emergency, and others who did not, might be a good starting place for an investigation.

The Family Steering Committee, representing some relatives of 9/11 victims, had requested the 9-11 Commission to raise numerous questions. Is it normal procedure for the director of the White House Situation Room to travel with the president [sic]? Why was Deborah Loewer, the Situation Room director,

in Florida rather than back in DC, while Bush was away on a trip? When did Bush determine that the United States was under attack? What if any information was transmitted from Secret Service agents who were in the World Trade Center that day? Why did Air Force One take off without a military escort?

With so few answers, an added irritant is to have partisans assert, falsely, that raising any questions is tantamount to jumping to conclusions: "conspiracy theory." Given the lurid events, it is difficult to keep any discussion in rational territory, and it is almost impossible to convey the logical point (informal logic) that a conclusion is one thing; a starting assumption is another.

But arriving at a conclusion, by investigation, evidence and deduction, is different from starting an investigation with what you wish your conclusion to be. An example of the latter can be found in Robert B. Stinnett's *Day of Deceit: The Truth about FDR and Pearl Harbor*. "This book contradicts and questions much of what has been written about the events and decisions that led to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. My sole purpose is to uncover the true story of events leading up to the devastating attack . . . and to document that it was not a surprise to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and many of his top military and policy advisors."

Stinnett unhesitatingly asserts that FDR "engineered" Pearl Harbor. He believes, and says openly, that the lives lost at Pearl Harbor were lost deliberately, in pursuit of the larger goal of inducing America into World War II: "Roosevelt believed that his countrymen would rally only to oppose an overt act of war on the United States. The decision he made, in concert with his advisors, was to provoke Japan through a series of actions into an overt act: the Pearl Harbor attack."

Horrible as the accusation against FDR is, Stinnett takes the position that the purported action was justified: "As a veteran of the Pacific War, I felt a sense of outrage as I uncovered secrets that had been hidden from Americans for more than fifty years. But I understood the agonizing dilemma faced by President Roosevelt. He was forced to find circuitous means to persuade an isolationist America to join in a fight for freedom."

Stinnett expresses sympathy for Roosevelt in this difficult situation, for him a classic Hegelian clash of categorical imperatives: "Painful though they surely were, Roosevelt's actions were strategically calculated to lead to the ultimate victory of allied forces over the Axis nations that threatened the liberties we all cherish. The advisors who formulated the provocative policies were staunch in their support though aware of the risks. I am mindful that it is easier to take a critical view of this policy a half century removed than to understand fully what went on in Roosevelt's mind in the year prior to Pearl Harbor."

Stinnett's thesis has been thoroughly refuted by experts on encryption and code-breaking, analyzing the declassified government documents including cable traffic on which his argument relies. Blaming Pearl Harbor on Roosevelt has long been a favorite of the hard right, going beyond accusations of incompetence or criminality well before Stinnett's book came out in December 1999, undoubtedly with the hope of helping Bush in the 2000 election.

The book could be dismissed as part of a continuous "traitor to his class" genre that began in FDR's lifetime, except that Stinnett is regrettably well connected or well positioned among FDR-knew theorists. He served on the aircraft carrier USS San Jacinto in World War II with George H. W. Bush. (Another of their shipmates was notorious Holocaust denier Russ Granata, who seems to have maintained ties with Stinnett until recently.) The jacket blurb reads, "Robert B. Stinnett served in the United States Navy under Lieutenant George Bush from 1942 to 1946, where he earned ten battle stars and a Presidential Unit Citation. He worked as a photographer and journalist for the Oakland Tribune until 1986, after which he resigned as a full-time employee to devote himself to this book. He is a consultant on the Pacific War for the BBC and for Asahi and NHK Television in Japan. He divides his time between Oakland and Hawaii."

Stinnett did not devote himself fully to *Day of Deceit*, however. In the same years, and using some of the same sources, he also produced a political hagiography of former President Bush, *George Bush: His World War II Years* (Brassey's Inc., Dulles, Virginia, 1992). Stinnett campaigned for both Bush 41 and Bush 43, and has written letters to editors and given interviews defending 41. His research for the Bush

book overlapped extensively with his ongoing research for the FDR book. Stinnett personally presented GHW Bush with a boxed copy of the biography in November 1991, as he mentions in a published interview; the Bush book includes a White House photograph of their visit, showing Stinnett with President Bush holding a WW2-vintage camera (99).

According to the interview, Stinnett had first renewed contact with the elder Bush in 1984, the same year he began, by his own accounts, his serious research into FDR's "foreknowledge," 16 years before he produced *Day of Deceit*. The research continued through those years, with a long correspondence of FOIA (Freedom of Information) requests to the Navy for the intercepts and other documents on which he bases his thesis.

Thus Stinnett launched his WW2 work on the books at the same time that George W. Bush decided to self-treat his problems with alcohol by voluntarily going dry: "On July 28, 1986, George W. Bush woke up with a hangover. It had been a loud, liquid night at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs, Colo., as he and friends from Texas celebrated their 40th birthdays. Now, as he embarked on his ritual morning run through a spectacular Rockies landscape, Bush felt lousy.

"Forty: a symbolic halfway point, a moment of appraisal. For the vice president's eldest son, it had been a year of business crises and personal drift. Bush had hewed closely to his father's path through life—Andover, Yale, flying warplanes, then into the Texas oil business—but so far, he had enjoyed little of his father's success.

"The last six months had been a near-disaster. Oil prices in west Texas, as high as \$37 a barrel a few years earlier, had plummeted to \$9 by Bush's birthday, tipping his company into a spiral of debt and shaky payrolls, forcing him into merger negotiations. And drinking clouded his personal life . . . That July day, Bush swore off alcohol. But his decision was about more than getting sober. Stirred in part by what he describes as an intense, reawakening Christian faith, Bush sought to seize control of his life. By doing so, he finally would begin to close the gap between what was expected of him and what he had achieved."

The younger Bush's epiphany that year surely included a bogus awakening as to the "real" character of FDR. Pleasantly contemptuous of millions of people who admired Roosevelt for what he did in the Great Depression and World War II, those who feel they have discovered the story behind the story must have experienced a powerful series of "clicks" of awareness. The "click" must have been especially powerful for someone substituting exercise for alcohol after decades of drift.

The bogus revelations about FDR came, furthermore, from a man toward whom the younger George Bush had every reason to feel friendly, a favorable biographer of his own father. This warm biographical effort received cooperation from the Bushes. Then-President George Bush is listed among Stinnett's sources as both "written interview" and "personal interview." (202) Marlin Fitzwater, then White House press secretary, is also listed as a written interview. Two other persons titled "Special Assistant to the President" are listed as sources via written, telephone, and personal interviews. (203)

Youthful photographs of former President Bush as student, cadet, ensign, and crew member, among the book's more than 300 photographs, come mostly from the White House (10, 14-17, 77). Others of the young Bush are Bush family photos, as are photos of young Barbara Pierce Bush and snapshots of Bush's World War II plane (38). Prescott Bush, Jr., brother of the former president, provided at least one informal snapshot (176). The frontispiece of *George Bush: His World War II Years* is a facsimile of a hand-signed note from George H. W. Bush, dated October 17, 1990: "Dear Bob: I was pleased to receive your letter and look forward to seeing your book. Those of us who served in Air Group Fifty-one will relive many memories of those days because of your wonderful efforts. My thanks. Thanks again for writing. Warm regards."

The "About the Author" note at the end of the book is illustrated by another White House photograph from the private meeting above mentioned: "The author shows President Bush his manuscript while Chief of Staff John Sununu and National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft look on, November 16, 1990."

Like the FDR book, the Bush book was timed partly for a national election campaign (the paperback and a hardcover reprint came out in 1992) and is not devoid of political overtones. The prologue is a lengthy defense of a gaffe by the former president, who had famously misstated the date of Pearl Harbor as "September 7" to an American Legion audience. Sometimes the book fails to sidestep obvious pitfalls of seeming to organize the Pacific Theater around Bush, with a teleological perspective homing in on the White House: "Aboard the San Jacinto a future president of the United States reviewed the flight plans for his missions in Operation Forager." (51) Snapshots include Bush appearing with his old shipmates in the 1984 and 1988 campaigns (146, 188). Much of the writing seems to defend Bush's controversial bailout in the Pacific and his conflicting public statements about it.

More importantly, the first 10 pages of *George Bush: His World War II Years* are devoted to suggesting that FDR had access in November 1941 to "startling information" that the Japanese fleet was headed toward targets, including Pearl Harbor. Thus the Bush book opens with a slightly guarded version of Stinnett's later Pearl Harbor argument. Briefly Stinnett praises "Station Hypo, the super secret U.S. Navy intercept center located at Pearl Harbor," "the headquarters of the most successful communications intelligence network ever operated by the American government." (1) The following pages leave little doubt as to the underlying suggestion, and the book bristles with declassified communications and correspondence from archives, the center of the author's later book.

Also foreshadowed is Stinnett's teleological view of Pearl Harbor: "The devastating bombing and submarine attack on Pearl Harbor in the early morning hours of December 7 united an outraged America that had been divided by isolationist creeds." Here, however, Stinnett's underlying thesis focuses on Bush rather than on Roosevelt: "Like many young men, a grim and determined George Bush reacted immediately, wanting to join U.S. naval aviation to avenge the Day of Infamy." (10)

Stinnett did much of his research in the Washington, DC, vicinity, eight years of the 12 while Bush was in office there. The list of resources for George Bush includes the Library of Congress, the Naval Historical Center, the Marine Corps Historical Center, and the National Archives, all obviously in DC and also listed in *Day of Deceit*. Along with White House interviews, Stinnett also lists several personal interviews in the Naval Security Group Command for the Bush book. (202-203) Appendix B in his latter book, "Research for Day of Deceit," begins, "The principal archival sources for this book are in the Pacific War communications intelligence (COMINT) files of the United States Navy maintained by the US Navy Security Group Command, the successor of Station US, the Navy's communications intelligence headquarters in 1941. The author learned of the existence of the files in 1983, filed an FOIA request with the Navy, and specifically requested immediate declassification of the entire file pertaining in any manner to the Pearl Harbor attack . . . Except for a few documents, the author's request was denied."

Bush is not named in *Day of Deceit*, and the book's index does not cover the 47 pages of appendices or the 65 pages of notes. Stinnett lists personal interviews with at least eight individuals as sources for both books, however, including several people in the Naval Security Group Command.

Speaking before the 9/11 commission (National Commission on Terrorist Acts upon the United States) on April 8, 2004, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice said in a prepared statement, "Despite the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915 and continued German harassment of American shipping, the United States did not enter the First World War until two years later. Despite Nazi Germany's repeated violations of the Versailles treaty and provocations throughout the mid 1930s, the western democracies did not take action until 1939. The U.S. government did not act against the growing threat from imperial Japan until it became all too evident at Pearl Harbor. And tragically, for all the language of war spoken before September 11th, this country simply was not on war footing.

"Since then, America has been at war and under President Bush's leadership, we will remain at war until the terrorist threat to our nation has ended. The world has changed so much that it is hard remember what our lives were like before that day."

This reassurance that we are now, happily, on a “war footing,” and in a war that will continue until terrorism is eliminated (forever) may be largely maladroit rhetoric. However, Rice reiterated it: “Now we have an opportunity and an obligation to move forward together. Bold and comprehensive changes are sometimes only possible in the wake of catastrophic events—events which create a new consensus that allows us to transcend old ways of thinking and acting. And just as World War II led to a fundamental reorganization of our national defense structure and the creation of the National Security Council, so has September 11th made possible sweeping changes in the ways we protect our homeland.”

As the daughter, niece, and great-niece of WW2 vets, this writer cringes at the implication that the National Security Council is the silver lining in WW2. Presumably that was not Rice’s literal meaning, even in the politicized NSC, thoroughly subordinated to the political White House.

But the broader implication that 9/11 somehow turned America around is impossible to mistake, especially in assertions that “the world has changed” and in the insistent reiteration of the brown-shirt term “homeland.” The attacks of September 11, 2001, have been used by the Bush administration to do away with any hope of a “peace dividend” once and for all—at this writing, so definitively that Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry has referred to it as a past hope. Like Pearl Harbor, the attacks of 9/11 have been used to produce a silver lining, more fiscal than figurative. The dollar amount of contracts awarded by the military-security sector increases by tens of billions every year.

Philip Zelikow, head of the 9/11 commission, reviewed *Day of Deceit* dismissively, as an “old saw” as premised on “the false belief that American intelligence had broken the Japanese naval code before the attack.” It would be a relief to be reassured that Bush 41 and Bush 43 rejected the debunked FDR-conspiracy theory, and especially that the purported conspiracy would have been somehow justified. But there is ample reason to fear that this hideous notion has influenced administration figures who exploited 9/11 to push an invasion of Iraq that they supported all along.

Stinnett himself, contacted by email at his request after being telephoned, did not answer questions about whether George W. Bush has been acquainted with his FDR theory. By email, Stinnett responded, “Bush 41 discussed pre Pearl Harbor communications intelligence concerning the Imperial Japanese Navy with me during my visits to the Oval Office while he was president.” Adding that “I have never met Bush 43, the current president [sic].” Stinnett argues that “*Day of Deceit* is the first book to disclose the massive Japanese naval intercepts obtained by the US Navy prior to Pearl Harbor. Many commentators are reluctant to fully disclose the pre Pearl Harbor intercepts believing the disclosure would sully the reputation of President Roosevelt.” Stinnett’s pro-Bush and Republican partisanship remains evident: “There are also the secret US Naval intercepts involving Vietnam’s Gulf of Tonkin incident, that, if disclosed, would sully even more presidents.”

He adds, “In 1990 when I discussed my book with Bush 41, the Provocation Plan adopted by President F. D. Roosevelt had not been declassified or released. I knew nothing about it. The Provocation Plan of October 1940 was not declassified until January 1995 by Pres. Clinton. Several years ago, I sent Bush 41 an autographed copy of *Day of Deceit*, but have not heard from him on this matter. I did not send a copy to Bush 43.”

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