

**MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD**

Event: Mr. Timothy Ahern, Vice President of Safety, Security and Environmental, for American Airlines.

Type: Interview

(R)

Prepared by: John Raidt

Special Access Issues: None

Teams: 7 and 8

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Participants (non-Commission): Timothy Ahern, Des Barry (outside counsel to AAL); Chris Christiansen (outside counsel to AAL); Doug Cotton (counsel, AAL)

Participants (Commission): Bill Johnstone and John Raidt

Location: AAL Corporate Headquarters, Ft. Worth, Texas

**Background**

[U] Ahern currently serves as an American Airlines Vice President responsible for the daily operation of the DFW hub.

[U] On 9/11/01 Ahern was Vice President of Safety, Security and Environmental, reporting directly to the office of the chairman of the corporation. In that capacity he was responsible for all of the policies and procedures associated with those areas. He was in that position from January, 2000 to September 2002.

[U] From summer of 1996 to January, 2000 he was Vice President for Operations, Planning and Performance responsible for the daily operations of the airline, including the scheduling of flight crew. From 1995 to 1996 he was Managing Director of Ground Operations.

**Organizational structure**

[U] The key people that reported to Ahern in his capacity as Vice President for Safety, Security and Environmental were as follows: Director of Security, Larry Wansley; Director of Safety, Scott Griffith; Director of Environmental, Jeannie Jones, and three directors covering security compliance, safety compliance and environmental compliance. The Director of Security Compliance was David Korn who was stationed in Texas. This structure was created in 2000. Prior to this change the safety organization and the security organization reported directly to the company's Executive VP of

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Operations Robert Baker. When Mr. Baker took over as Vice Chairman they changed the structure so that Ahern and the security function reported directly to the Office of the Chairman (Carty and Baker).

[U] Under this structure the security function had a direct line to the Office of the Chairman, rather than falling under the jurisdiction of the top operations officer (Arpey as of 9/11).

[U] While Ahern was a Vice President, Arpey (in charge of operations) was an Executive Vice President. Ahern said that Executive VP's were part of the executive committee organization that would meet routinely with the chairman and vice chairman. He was not part of that group.

[U] Ahern said that while he was not a member of the executive committee organization he was able to go right to the office of the chairman on issues dealing with safety, security and environmental. He did not have to go through operations to raise issues. He met with Vice Chairman every day in the form of a daily morning conference call among high-level AAL personnel to discuss what happened the day before at the airline, and what they expected in the coming day. While Ahern did not consider himself a co-equal with the Executive Vice President of Operations because he was running the airline but in the areas of safety, security and environmental he was the top person.

[U] Ahern said that neither the Chairman nor the Vice-Chairman ever vetoed any security initiatives that he proposed. He could not recall any instances whether the Executive Vice-President for Operations ever vetoed a security initiative because it would be too disruptive to operations.

**The comparative treatment of safety, security and environmental at AAL**

[U] Ahern said that AAL put all three of areas under his authority—safety, security and environmental--on an equal footing. He and the vice chairman gave equal attention to the three issues. His dealings with the office of the chairman were normally with the vice chairman rather than the chairman. Ahern said he never felt like he lacked support for his issues by the Office of the Chairman.

**Assessment of security performance at AAL**

[U] Ahern said that AAL created a Domestic Security Program in 1999 and an International Security Program sometime before 1999 to assess and audit security practices and performance. The program and its staff were established to review standards compliance, providing an overview of performance independent from the information the airline was receiving from its field organization. The AAL general manager at individual airports was responsible for the day-to-day security performance at his or her facilities, and for making sure the airline was meeting FAA requirements.

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[U] Assessments produced by the program would be reported to the relevant general manager and corporate headquarters personnel. Ahern said these assessments together with the FAA's audits would give the company a good idea about what was going on in an individual city. They would help pinpoint the source of problems, whether an issue was an individual failure, an organizational failure, a record keeping problem or something else. Ahern said that the program gave AAL a health check-up on each of its individual "cities."

[U] Ahern said that none of the information he received from the Domestic Security Program assessments indicated broad-based systemic problems. The issues were mainly with individuals who needed remedial training or some other adjustment. Many of the problems were related to record keeping.

### **Security at Dulles and Logan**

[U] In regard to the findings of the Domestic Security Program specifically for Dulles and Logan prior to 9/11, Ahern said that he recalls that Dulles was "quite good." He said that well before 9/11 AAL had fired the security contractor for poor performance at Logan. After the change of vendor the reports improved. Ahern said he doesn't believe from an AAL standpoint that anything stood-out at Boston or Dulles that would indicate to terrorists they were particularly vulnerable.

[U] Ahern said that the focus of checkpoints was "deterrence." In regard to FAA/IG/GAO audits of checkpoints, he remembers seeing results for his cities that were actually quite good. He said that from a goal-setting standpoint, you are striving for 100 percent deterrence. He said that as far as he was concerned, that when you look at all the customers that checkpoints served they "did their job" and "deterrence was there." Checkpoints were just one of a number of circles of deterrence, and that in the 10 years leading up to 9-11 the checkpoints were quite successful in "deterring." To his knowledge the terrorist didn't carry anything on to the airplanes that the government prohibited.

[U] Ahern said the system wasn't built to stop someone who wanted to use an aircraft as a weapon of mass destruction. He believes that the terrorist's greatest weapon was the element of surprise to the traveling public, the airline and the FAA.

### **Pre-Screening**

[U] Ahern said that CAPPS was designed for a bombing threat more than anything else. He said that all indications received from the FAA were that the threat was a traditional hijacking or a bombing, and therefore the FAA policies were focused in those areas.

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**Ambiguity of Federal Rules re: "deadly and dangerous" items**

[SSI] Ahern said that the Checkpoint Operations Guide, which listed items considered as "deadly or dangerous" weapons was developed by the industry and reviewed by the FAA.

[SSI] He said FAA's responsibility was to take the intelligence information it received from the intelligence community and develop policies and procedures to address the threat. He said it was the job of the air carrier to implement those policies and procedures.

[SSI] Ahern was asked about the portion of the Air Carrier Standard Security Program calling on carriers to use "common sense" about what items to allow passengers to carry into the cabin of an aircraft. The ACSSP provided an example as follows: {sewing scissors in the hands of a woman with sewing equipment is allowable, but perhaps sewing scissors in the hands of a man with no other sewing equipment should be prohibited}. Ahern responded that it didn't work that way. There wasn't that kind of discretion.

[SSI] Ahern said he didn't think the FAA intended to be vague in their directions to the air carriers. To his knowledge there was nothing (i.e. intelligence information) presented to the FAA or the air carriers that told them they should do something other than what they were doing at the checkpoints, at the gates, or on the aircraft to counter an expected threat.

**Intelligence**

[SSI] Ahern said the data that was provided to the airlines in the summer of 9/11 pointed toward an overseas issue, not a domestic problem. He said that nothing was given to American Airlines that raised concern about an increasing threat at the domestic level. Moreover, he never heard from the FAA that they felt "blind" about what was going on with terrorists domestically.

[SSI] Ahern said that he remembers in the summer of 2001 that most of the threat information was pointing to the Middle East and that AAL didn't have operations in the area. All of the FAA's Information Circulars pointed to areas outside the areas served by AAL.

[SSI] Ahern was not aware of any presentation by the FAA in 2001 to the airline industry about the terrorist threat to civil aviation, which mentioned the possibility of suicide hijacking in the United States but discounted the probability of such an event because no evidence suggested that anyone was thinking along those lines.

[U] Ahern was not aware of an FAA assessment indicating a serious threat to civil aviation domestically, which was published in the federal register as part of an FAA rulemaking in the summer of 2001.

### **Company Events Reporting System**

[U] AAL maintained a "Company Events Reporting System" to log suspicious behavior and security concerns identified by AAL employees. Ahern said he was satisfied that based on the number of reports entered into the system, that pilots and flight attendants were well aware of the program and knew to report suspicious behavior. He said that there were no written standards providing guidance on what qualified as suspicious behavior. Prior to 9-11 someone taking pictures of the cockpit would not have been alarming or suspicious. The company's jump seat policy was under the jurisdiction of the Vice President of Flight. (Note: Commission staff will review the CERS entries from 1998 through March 2002).

### **FAMS**

[U] Ahern did not know much about the FAM program. He didn't know whether FAM's were covering domestic routes prior to 9-11 or not.

### **Cockpit Door**

[U] Ahern said that a hardened cockpit door on 9-11 wouldn't have done any good because the "common strategy" was to cooperate. The common strategy was a policy established by the FAA for the industry.

### **9-11—The Day**

[U] On 9-11-01, Ahern was preparing a presentation for the executive committee on environmental issues when he received a page from one of the safety personnel in the Systems Operations Control facility reporting that there was "an event." He received the page sometime between 7:30 am and 8:00 am (CDT). He immediately went to the Systems Operations Command Center. By the time he got there the center was already staffed. He arrived at the SOCC before the second plane had hit the WTC. He called his wife and told her to turn on the TV because they thought they had an airplane that hit the WTC.

[U] He said that the SOCC is activated when the company experiences a significant event that needs to be specially managed. Doing so allows the airline to isolate the event and gather the people who need to be present to manage it. Most of the morning was spent dealing gathering data and addressing issues on behalf of the FBI. Two FBI agents were on-post at the command center.

### **Screening flights**

[U] Ahern does not recall whether AAL or the FBI examined the manifest of flights in the air to identify additional security concerns. He does recall that the manifests for AAL 11 and AAL 77 were locked out and pulled right away. (Staff note: the time of this lock-

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out will help identify the airlines situational awareness because it was in the company's interest to do this as soon as trouble was identified. The lock out time is noted on the SOCC log and also should be time dated by the computer).

[U] The long haul flights were a special concern because they were still over the Atlantic. He said there might have been an individual who requested that they pull a particular manifest but he doesn't recall any general effort to review the manifest of all flights in the sky.

[U] Ahern indicated that he, Larry Wansley, and a Mr. Divan, were the AAL personnel in the SOCC working with the FBI.

### **Situational Awareness**

[U] Ahern said that what was happening with AAL 11 was pretty clear to us, and after the crash we took immediate action to "ground stop" the northeast. He didn't recall the time of the ground stop but they have paperwork that provides the time. (Staff Note: Compare this ground stop time to that of United Airlines as well as the take-off time of UAL Flight 93. The ground stop was later than UAL 93 take-off but how much later?)

[U] Ahern agreed that AAL originally thought that the second strike of the WTC was AAL 77. AAL 77 had been lost on radar; or rather the transponder was turned off. He said he remembers that after the second WTC strike there was some communication between American and United, but Ahern was not involved in that communication.

[U] The first indication AAL had that an airplane had struck the Pentagon was from Mr. McFall's, one of Ahern's security staff who happened to be in Washington DC. McFall saw the Pentagon crash from his taxicab. He called Ahern and reported that he saw smoke coming from the Pentagon. McFall did not know that it was the crash of AAL 77. Ahern delivered the information to one of the individuals who were recording data in the SOCC.

[U] McFall was getting ready to go to NYC because AAL knew about AAL 11. When he saw the smoke from the Pentagon he stayed in Washington DC. McFall went to the wreckage of AAL 77, but Ahern is not sure when that happened. Ahern was not involved in tasking McFall to go to the Pentagon to check on the crash site, or in dispatching anyone to the Pentagon after the report of smoke was received to see if the aircraft was an American flight.

### **Tasks**

[U] After the Pentagon strike most of Ahern's time was spent working with people in the SOCC to get AAL's planes on the ground and addressing issues that came up on American's internal corporate phone bridge (an open conference bridge that operated

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throughout the day) or individual calls that came in from their cities. Ahern said that this phone bridge was not recorded.

[U] Ahern said that he did not participate in any conference calls with ATA on September 11. Bob Baker talked with ATA regularly but he's not sure about communications that day.

[U] Ahern stated that he was in contact with Janet Riffe, the FAA Principal Security Inspector assigned to United Airlines, throughout the day.

### **Weapons and Tactics**

[U] Ahern did not hear anything about the use of a gun or a shooting aboard AAL 11. Janet Riffe never mentioned any such allegation. Chris Bidwell, with AAL Security, never mentioned to Ahern that FAA had called AAL asking about the origins and validity of a gun report.

[U] Ahern said he has no knowledge of weapons or tactics used by the terrorists. All he knew was that a flight attendant had reported that another flight attendant had been stabbed, but Ahern said that the weapon used is still unclear to him today. He said that he also remembers hearing about a report that it was hard to breathe on one of the airplanes, but he did not hear anything about the use of mace, pepper spray or fake bombs by the terrorists.

### **Ground Stop**

[U] Ahern was asked who had the authority to ground stop the airline. He said the decision on 9-11 was made out of the SOCC, and that such a decision was that of senior management. He stressed that AAL had taken action to ground their fleet before the FAA told them to do so.

Ahern said that on 9-11 he didn't hear any information that FAA ATC had heard suspicious transmissions coming from AAL 11 that the hijackers had "other planes." He doesn't recall hearing that ATC had passed on any information they obtained from communications with the cockpits of other aircraft.

Ahern said that AAL's nationwide ground stop quickly followed the AAL ground stop of the Northeast.

### **Recommendations to improve aviation security**

[U] Ahern opined that data gathering and the sharing of intelligence, not only among U.S. government agencies, but between the U.S. and governments of foreign countries should be improved.

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[U] Ahern said that the airlines, both domestically and abroad, should share all information they receive with their governments, but that the governments have the manpower and expertise to conduct the assessments that must then be passed back to the airlines.

[SSI] Ahern said that TSA employees are doing the same thing that the contractors were doing pre 9-11. The U.S. government needs to do a better job of focusing on risk. In that vein he likes the idea of a Trusted Traveler program so that security energy can be spent on the individuals we don't know a lot about. He didn't have an opinion on whether screeners should be federal employees or contractors—as long as they can meet the standards.