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GALLINGTON: When Flight 77 struck

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COMMENTARY:

The morning of Sept. 11, 2001, I was in my office at the Pentagon on the "E Ring," next to the second corridor facing the south parking lot. Terrorist-hijacked American Airlines Flight 77 slammed into the building around the southwest corner from the third corridor - it sounded and felt like the dull thud of a large bomb, the building shuddered and I grabbed my desk.

Knowing right away that it was an attack of some kind (we were watching the Twin Towers on TV) we quickly evacuated the building into the smoke-filled hallway and then spilled into the Pentagon's south parking lot. We could see the building was on fire - I heard several people say an airplane had hit the building.

I was in shock, as were most of us. Dazed, I walked home quickly (fortunately, not far) to check on my family as no cell phones were working. My young daughter had been dismissed from school, my wife had picked her up and both had returned home. I asked my wife to take me back and drop me off near the Pentagon. I was there for the next 36 hours, then brought people from the office home to spend the night in our guest room and on the living room couch. The building continued to burn for the next few days. The clothes I wore that week wreaked of acrid smoke and had to be thrown away.

Like a lot of my friends and colleagues, I knew people who were killed that day in the Pentagon, at the Twin Towers, and even on Flight 77. The small courtyard in the center of the Pentagon - what we called "Ground Zero" during the Cold War - was just that, serving as a recovery staging area and a temporary morgue. It was a bizarre sight, especially at night, when it resembled an Army MASH.

The day was a blur, but I remember enough of it and the few days that followed to realize we didn't know much about what to do. So

much so that I kept a diary that I called "1941," not because of the similarities of the Pearl Harbor attack, but because of the John Belushi movie with the same name that spoofed the hysteria on the West Coast after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

I attended lots of high-level meetings as we struggled to deal with the situation. The first thing that was obvious was that nobody knew much about anything - the chaos in "1941" was a good reference for the fuzzy thinking. Lots of decisions were made with very little information, just because someone imagined an awful scenario: Usually a "what if" hypothetical of something horrible happening in Washington D.C.

And, we were obsessed with Washington, D.C., as if there were no other parts of the country we had to worry about - the fact was we didn't know much about the rest of the country (because we had no way of knowing) and the vulnerabilities there, so we worried about the ones we could identify with. However, we fretted continuously about civilian nuclear power sites: No one knew how well or poorly they were protected because it was the responsibility of the individual civilian site operators as part of the license they had with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

We had no real experience with military operations in the United States, so when we worried about what would happen if a soldier shot a Stinger missile at an airplane that had been taken over by terrorists, we had to think about where the airplane might fall. Then, we were reminded that if we decided to deploy Stingers in and around the Washington Capital Area, the assumption would have to be that the Army Air Defense units controlled the airspace. Of course they didn't, because we typically had hundreds civilian airplanes in the air - unless we grounded civil aviation near the Capitol, which we did for a while after the attack.

Ultimately, a plan was approved that assumed the hijacked airplane was on an approach to Washington National (Reagan) Airport and that the debris would (hopefully) fall into the Potomac River - this plan was necessary to open Washington National Airport. If that turned out not to be the scenario, we would have to deal with it at the time - and some

young soldier with a Stinger would hopefully be told what to do, presumably by someone who made the correct decision

I attended lots of briefings on the effects of a nuclear weapon detonation in the National Capital Area; the topography and prevailing winds made it clear that most of the casualties due to blast and fallout would be on the Maryland side - and people breathed a sigh of relief if they lived in Virginia. I remember another briefing that dealt with the vulnerabilities from various waterborne threats - again to the National Capital area - this one noted that Alexandria, Va., was particularly vulnerable. A high-ranking official said at the meeting, "Hey, that's where I live" as if to say- before he caught himself - that it should somehow have a higher priority.

Most ignored the remark; however, everyone worried about the safety of their own families - to the extent that it had to affect one's work. I tried to separate the two but could not - so, I sent my wife and daughter to my wife's hometown in the Midwest, where they stayed until after Thanksgiving. This was the only way I could do justice to my job and not worry about the safety of my family.

Somehow we got through it - and, fortunately, we were not attacked again, as many feared that we might be - and, eventually the right groups were formed as we began to deal with the more complex issues and problems of defending our homeland and doing post-attack recovery operations. Do we have it right? No - witness the fiasco in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. But we are much better organized, have a more realistic military command structure (albeit not yet truly integrated), a nationwide homeland security perspective and are able to fit the really hard problems into a much more responsive decision-making framework - as demonstrated in the recent preparations for and response to Hurricane Gustav. Nevertheless, "1941" was an accurate name for my diary, because we were mostly clueless on yet another "day of infamy" - 60 years later.

Daniel Gallington served in senior positions at the Defense and Justice departments and as general counsel for the Senate Intelligence Committee.