

Fighter Response After Attacks Questioned

Senators Grill Nominee for Joint Chiefs Chairman on Military Readiness at Home

By BRADLEY GRAHAM
Washington Post Staff Writer

Forty minutes passed between the time New York's second World Trade Center tower was struck by a hijacked commercial airliner Tuesday and another commandeered plane crashed into the Pentagon, and 27 more minutes elapsed before still another terrorist-directed plane went down in a Pennsylvania forest.

Yet no U.S. fighter jets were able to get into the air in time to prevent the assault on the Defense Department.

That delay was seized on yesterday by members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, who pressed Gen. Richard B. Myers, in line to become the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on the readiness of American forces to protect the United States. Appearing before the panel for his confirmation hearing, the four-star Air Force officer said he personally had phoned the commander in charge of U.S. air defense after the New York attacks.

"I think the decision was taken then to launch" American warplanes, Myers recalled. But he noted that only a "handful" of jet fighters were on alert at any given time at U.S. military airfields, and their main mission has been to defend against threatening planes coming from outside American borders, not commercial aircraft originating at domestic airports and hijacked by terrorists.

"We're pretty good if the threat is coming from outside; we're not so good if it's coming from inside," Myers said.

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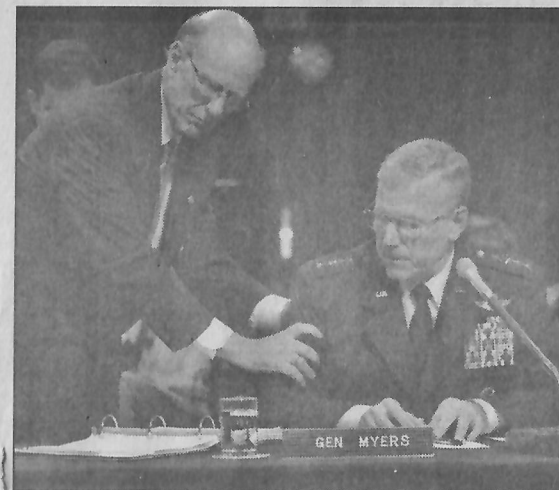
Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Fla.) first raised the lapse in time between the attacks and the appearance of U.S. jet fighters over the nation's capital and other major metropolitan areas. "Why didn't we scramble aircraft sooner?" he asked.

While Myers had some difficulty recalling the exact sequence of

events that day, other military officers later provided these details. They said the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), which is responsible for U.S. air defense, first received word that an aircraft had been hijacked about 10 minutes before the first New York tower was struck, but there was no indication then where the plane was headed. Air Force jets were in the skies over New York about 15 minutes after

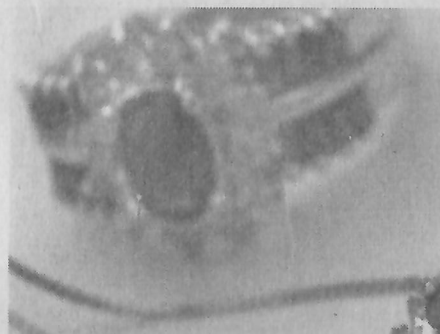
the second tower was hit, and they were flying over Washington about 15 minutes after the Pentagon was attacked.

A senior Pentagon officer said the fighter jets would have been in position to intercept the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania, which was believed en route to Washington. But the officer said that federal aviation authorities had never asked the Pentagon for help in intercepting that plane.



BY RAY LUSTIG—THE WASHINGTON POST

Sen. Pat Roberts (R-Kan.), after introducing Gen. Richard B. Myers, nominee for chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to the Senate Armed Services Committee.



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Concerns about the Pentagon's general preparedness to deal with terrorist strikes dominated yesterday's hearing, which could not help but be overshadowed by the short- and long-term implications of Tuesday's surprise attacks. With Myers due to assume the Pentagon's top military job at the end of the month, Sen. Max Cleland (D-Ga.) remarked that no precedent existed for a new chairman to be taking over "at such a perilous time."

But Myers, a decorated jet fighter pilot, will be hitting the ground running. He has served as vice chairman for the past 20 months and was deeply involved in the military's response this week from the outset, particularly since the outgoing chairman, Gen. Henry H. Shelton, was on a flight over the Atlantic when the attacks occurred.

Myers confirmed that he and other top officials had received no indications from U.S. intelligence agencies that such an extensive and sophisticated strike against the nation's financial and military centers might be coming. "There was no strategic warning that this was contemplated or planned, to the best of my knowledge," the general testified.

He readily agreed with comment after comment by senators that the government needed to improve its intelligence-gathering capabilities, its crisis response procedures and its ability to deal with the even more horrific consequences of a potential biological or chemical attack on U.S. population centers. One of his own principal concerns, Myers said, was defining just what role the military should play in domestic security actions. He noted objections raised by civil libertarians in the past about federal troops assuming too intrusive a role.

"What will keep me awake in this job will be the things we haven't thought about," he said. "There are probably more surprises out there."

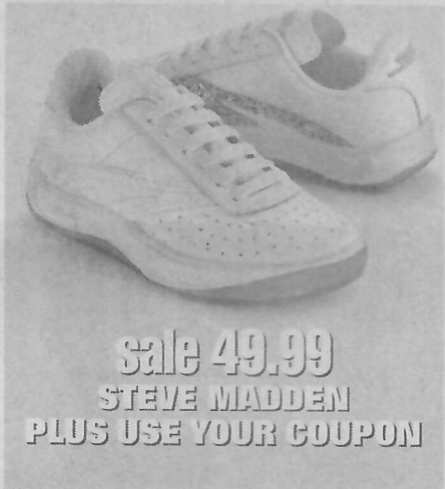
At the same time, Myers insisted that U.S. forces are "trained, ready and extremely capable" of carrying out President Bush's call to intensify the battle against terrorists.

Asked by Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.), the committee chairman,



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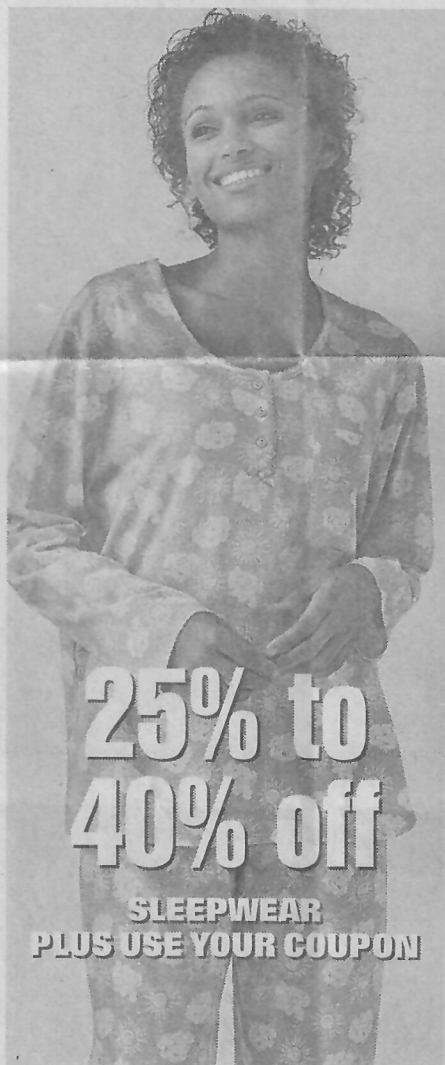
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Counter Response After Attacks Questioned

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GRAHAM
Staff Writer

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Sen. Pat Roberts (R-Kan.), left, after introducing Gen. Richard B. Myers, named chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to the Armed Services Committee.

BY RAY LUSTIG—THE WASHINGTON POST



was seized on yesterday by members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, who introduced Richard B. Myers, in a hearing to name the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on the eve of the American forces to leave the United States. Appearing on a panel for his confirmation hearing, the four-star Air Force general said he personally oversaw the commander in chief's U.S. air defense after the September 11 attacks.

The decision was taken by the "independent" American warplanes recalled. But he noted that a "handful" of jet fighters were on alert at any given time at major airfields, and their mission has been to defend against incoming planes coming from the American borders, commercial aircraft originating from domestic airports and hijacked by terrorists.

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