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ABC Anchor Never Insulted Bush During Crisis Coverage, But Did Label His Day Trip "A Little Strange"

September 11, 2001: What Did Jennings Say?

Amid the horrible pictures and beyond-belief carnage last Tuesday, some ABC viewers thought they heard Peter Jennings take a couple of cheap shots at President Bush, and they let us know about it. Jennings was on the air for 17 hours, from shortly after 9:00 am EDT through 2:00 am the next day. Media Research Center analysts reviewed tapes of the entire awful day, and found no insults or disrespectful comments by the ABC anchor, although he did fret about why the President had not returned to Washington in the middle of the day.

■ **9:30 am:** After the President made a statement in Florida, Jennings described him as "clearly shaken," and summarized him as having said "the two things which a President must say at a moment like this: terrorism will not stand...and God bless the victims and their families."

■ **12:36 pm:** "I don't mean to say this in melodramatic terms, but where is the President of the United States?" Jennings wondered aloud when he realized that Air Force One should have already landed outside Washington, DC. "Pretty soon the country needs to know where he is."

■ **12:50 pm:** Learning that Bush had been diverted to Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana, Jennings remarked, "None of us should be surprised at what's happening. First of all, the Secret Service is a huge, powerful, authoritative organization which takes the President's safety...with deep and profound seriousness." On the other hand, "the President and his response to this is also part of the psychological package because the country looks to the President on occasions like this to be reassuring to the nation. Some Presidents do it well, some Presidents don't."

■ **12:57 pm:** Traveling with the President, ABC's Ann Compton reported on Secret Service fears for his safety. Jennings said soon the country will "expect him to be back in Washington, to send not just a message to those of us in the nation who look to the President for some sense of political and national stability, but also to the other parts of

the world where these enemies of the United States, of whom we've talked quite a lot about today, at the moment must surely think they have the United States on the run, to some extent....The President needs to be on station."

■ **1:15 pm:** After the taped statement that the President made in Louisiana was played, Jennings reacted positively: "The President could not have spoken more accurately in that final remark — here a great nation is being tested — and the President reassures the nation and anybody else in the world who will hear this, that the nation will pass the test." He then praised America (see box).

■ **2:25 pm:** "Where's Mr. Bush?" Jennings asked Claire Shipman in Washington, DC. She reported that while "he wants to come back home, his security team does not feel it is safe right now." Learning that the President would be taken to a secret, secure location, Jennings admitted that "[we] don't know where the President is going to go next. Seems a little bit strange."

■ **3:35 pm:** "What are you doing in Nebraska?" he asked Compton after Bush arrived at the Strategic Air Command. ABC's George Stephanopoulos explained the President would have all of his capabilities in the secure bunker.

■ **5:05 pm:** With the President en route to Washington, Jennings said "the Secret Service can be accused, can be accused on occasion, of overreacting and having its way, and even bullying on occasion, but it always — this particularly true in the wake of the assassination of President Kennedy — always says to the public and those people who wish to resist, 'Well, what would you have us do? Do you remember President Kennedy's assassination, the attempt on President Ford?' And so, in some respects, it's hard to fault them for moving the President around the country today, even if you were inclined to do so, because the degree of uncertainty that has existed in much of the country as well as overseas today has been very, very intense."

Jennings on America's Place in the World:

"I recognize that it's one man's opinion...[but] I think what people in most parts of the world believe, that as horrible as this is for the United States and its citizens, the United States continues to be unquestionably the leadership of the world and the example in the world of freedom and democracy." — *approximately 1:15 pm EDT, ABC News live coverage, Sept. 11, 2001.*

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PETER JENNINGS, SEPTEMBER 11, 2001 (cont.)

■ **6:55 pm:** As Bush's helicopter landed on the White House lawn, Jennings sympathetically offered that "there's nothing that this President, this new and young President, could ever have imagined was going to occur on his watch which would test his leadership qualities so, and he is going — and how he responds, how he accommodates the country's frustration, how he accommodates the country's anxiety and anger, and how he responds or finds a way to respond and — as we have said many times — to whom, will mark George Bush however it goes, one way or the other."

■ **8:30 pm:** Before the President's Oval Office address, Jennings recounted, "I think most of you know that the President has been on something of a strange journey, today.... ABC's Ann Compton was with him all day and told, talked all day about the struggle between the security and the political apparatus whether the President would get back to Washington. Well, the President is back in Washington now and there has been no time in his presidency, and there may never be a time like this again, when it has been so important what he says to the country because I think we all know at moments like this the country looks to the President of the United States for understanding, for, for knitting the country together. And some Presidents do it brilliantly and some do not."

■ **8:37 pm:** After the speech, Jennings factually reviewed its major points with Stephanopoulos, then added: "And then I thought, by the way also, if I may add, that this President particularly, who feels so strongly about his Christianity, felt it a good time to say, to quote those lines from Psalm 23, 'Even though I walk,' or, 'Yea though I walk through the valley of death, I fear no evil because God is with me.' And that will just sit so appropriately, I believe, in the minds and the sentiments of many Americans tonight."

■ **9:25 pm:** Claire Shipman related that complaints about Bush's absence from Washington were coming from Capitol Hill. She told Jennings "there was a little bit of

grumbling in Washington, some members of Congress frustrated that they weren't hearing from the President, that the President wasn't back in Washington, but the leadership says that they absolutely understand why the President was traveling around the country today."

■ **9:45 pm:** Interviewing New York Governor George Pataki, Jennings remarked: "You said yourself you talked to President Bush and to Vice President Cheney. We'd gotten the impression that, for a while today, Mr. Cheney was the only person left in the White House."

■ **11:50 pm:** "It's been an extraordinary day for the President," Jennings declared before a story by Compton about the security envelope that surrounded Bush for most of the day. Compton told him: "For the President, it was also an unusual day. We haven't seen this man tested by fire, and we saw George Bush take the full brunt of

everything today." Of the President's Oval Office speech, Jennings said that although "he and his staff didn't have an enormous amount of time to work on it, it seems, in large measure, to have satisfied people all over the nation tonight in terms of what he actually said."

■ **1:45 am:** Nearing the end of his 17-hour day, Jennings again reviewed the major points of the President's speech to the nation: "Whatever people's individual appraisal of the political record of George W. Bush, it is pretty clear, I think, from what we're getting around the country

today, that the President hit the mark, that where America looked out and saw the face of evil, this attack, with total indifference to who was involved — innocent civilians in every case, the heart of the military establishment in one case, innocent passengers, the vast bulk of whom were civilians, on board commercial aircraft today — the President said the world could look then at the United States and see the best of democracy at work." — *Rich Noyes*

Jennings on Palestinian Celebrations:

"Take a look at a scene from Jerusalem not too long ago in which there is some celebration, that the powerful United States has been harmed, has been seen to be vulnerable, has been hurt, I suppose, in the broadest sense of the word. And the people who go off to do this sort of thing...are just filled, brimming with anger at the United States, and we are now becoming more experienced with the notion that there are young men for the most part, who are prepared to blow themselves up along with everybody else in terms, if they can be of service to the cause.... Hatred of the United States as a patron of Israel, whether you're from Afghanistan, or whether you're from Iran, Iraq, or inside the Palestinian territories is so intense at some levels, and has become more intense in recent months, that nobody will be, very many people will not be surprised at this attack today." — *approximately 12:30 pm EDT, ABC News live coverage, September 11, 2001.*

L. Brent Bozell III, Publisher; **Brent Baker, Rich Noyes**, Editors; **Jessica Anderson, Brian Boyd, Geoffrey Dickens, Paul Smith, Brad Wilmouth**, Media Analysts; **Kristina Sewell**, Research Associate; **Liz Swasey**, Director of Communications. Watch RealPlayer video of Dan Rather reacting to the attacks on CBS's *Late Show* at www.mrc.org.