



YOUR KINDLE NOTES FOR:

TWA 800: The Crash, the Cover-Up, and the Conspiracy

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18 Highlight(s) | 0 Note(s)

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Mayer endeavored to tell the board members what the witnesses, a quarter of whom were less than eleven miles away, actually observed. Some of what he said was true: only a few saw TWA 800 before it blew up; fewer still saw the nose section fall to the sea as it was not on fire; many saw what appeared to be a fireball breaking into pieces as it fell to the sea. Mayer claimed, however, that no one saw the initial explosion, which was not true. He insisted that the flaming fuselage, which looked like "a small light or streak," confused witnesses into thinking they saw a missile. This was egregiously

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false. Mayer had some explaining to do, and he knew it. By the witness group's own count, 258 witnesses reported seeing a streak of light. There was, he conceded, "a remarkable consistency" among them. Of those 258 witnesses, fifty-six, by Mayer's count, put his casuistry to the test. These were the witnesses like Mike Wire and Joseph Delgado, who saw the object ascend straight up from the horizon. As to why these witness accounts "didn't seem to fit," Mayer offered two explanations, one more specious than the other. His best shot was to blame the FBI. Mayer admitted the agents did not record the interviews. They simply took notes, many of which were "incomplete" or "vaguely worded." As a result, "The documents may not always say what the witness said." This was true to a degree, especially in the second round of interviews in 1997. At that stage in the investigation, the agents were trying to dilute the strength of the testimony, even if it meant making a teetotaler a drinker. Mayer's second rationale was more insulting

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Before letting Mayer go, Hall had one more public relations problem to solve. Reed Irvine's Accuracy in Media helped organize the "TWA 800 Eyewitness Alliance." A week before the hearings, its members took out a full-page ad in the Washington Times boldly headlined, "We Saw TWA Flight 800 Shot Down by Missiles And We Won't Be Silenced Any Longer."¹⁸ The ad featured the testimony of seven witnesses including Mike Wire, Dwight Brumley, Paul Angelides, Major Fritz Meyer, and Joseph Delgado. It was not easy to ignore. "What do you think about those accounts?" Hall

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I sensed correctly that my relationship with the Weekly Standard was over. Those who believe that the conservative media would jump at a story potentially damaging to the Clintons have no experience with conservative media. In Washington, at least, I had crossed the line from responsible journalist to conspiracy theorist. Peter Goelz certainly thought so. I knew Goelz from Kansas City, though not well. In a county without much in the way of Republican opposition, I did some political media for local Democrats, including future senator Claire McCaskill in her successful run for Jackson County prosecutor. Goelz worked as a Democratic consultant and lobbyist, and so our paths crossed once or twice. Locally, Goelz was best known for his lobbying

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Given the gravity of the situation, one would have expected Clinton and his advisors to feature this saga in their respective memoirs, especially since all this chaos and uncertainty unfolded in the heat of a presidential campaign. Yet save for Clarke, they did not, not at all. So suffocating was the shroud of silence that cloaked the TWA 800 investigation that the individuals most deeply involved all but refused to talk about it. As a case in point, in his 957-page 2004 memoir, *My Life*, Bill Clinton spent one paragraph on TWA 800 and that a thoroughly dishonest one. "At the time everyone assumed—wrongly as it turned out—that this was a terrorist act," Clinton wrote. "There was even speculation that the plane had been downed by a rocket fired from a boat in Long Island Sound."¹ No, the fifty-six certified NTSB witnesses who claimed to see an object ascend from the horizon all traced its provenance to the Atlantic Ocean, south of Long Island. The Sound is north of Long Island. "While I cautioned against jumping to

conclusions,” continued the former president, “it was clear that we had to do more to strengthen aviation safety.” He then added a second paragraph bragging about the intrusive and irrelevant measures he and Vice President Al Gore took—or promised to take—to avoid future bombings. That was it. A week after the crash, Bill and Hillary spent three heart-wrenching hours meeting with the victims’ families. Clarke described the president “praying with them, hugging them, taking pictures with them.” He spoke of how “Mrs. Clinton” retreated alone to a makeshift chapel, there to pray “on her knees.”² For someone who liked to boast of her empathy with ordinary people, Hillary could have made literary hay with a scene this poignant. She did not. In her 528-page memoir, *Living History*, Hillary spent just one-third of a sentence on TWA 800, which, for her, was merely one out of several “tragic events” that summer.³ In his memoir, *My FBI: Bringing Down The Mafia, Investigating Bill Clinton, and Fighting the War on Terror*, former FBI director Louis Freeh mentioned the crash in passing as a footnote to the Khobar Towers bombing in Saudia Arabia: “Three weeks later, on July 17, TWA flight 800 exploded off Long Island minutes after taking off from John F. Kennedy International Airport. No one knew what brought it down: mechanical failure, a bomb, a ground-to-air missile all seemed possible in the early stages.”⁴ No investigation during Freeh’s tenure generated more news coverage or demanded as much FBI attention, and yet Freeh begrudged it only two sentences, neither of which answered the question as to what did bring the plane down. In his memoir *Off With Their Heads*, presidential advisor Dick Morris teased his audience but did not deliver. He cited TWA 800 as one of “three attacks” in the “terror summer of 1996.” Wrote Morris, “Americans demanded action. But all they got from Clinton were speeches.”⁵ He did not shy from speaking in detail of the other...

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two about omerta from the Times newsroom. As the lone White House chronicler of the TWA 800 aftermath, Richard Clarke buttressed the administration case just when the 9/11 Commission might have been tempted to scrutinize it. Unfortunately, little of what he wrote was true. “The FAA,” he reported, “was at a total loss for an explanation. The flight path and the cockpit communications were normal. The aircraft had climbed to 17,000 feet, then there was no aircraft.”¹¹ In fact, if the FAA had no explanation, its people would have likely contacted the NTSB. Clarke was summoned precisely because the FAA did have an explanation: the radar data showing an unknown object approaching

TWA 800 just before it blew up. It was the radar data, not the eyewitness reports, that prompted Clarke's meeting. As to the "17,000 feet" reference, Clarke incorporated the CIA's zoom climb altitude into this 1996 story long before the CIA imagined it and repeated the altitude in his 2004 book long after the NTSB disowned it. Roughly four weeks after the crash, the late FBI terrorist expert John O'Neill reportedly told Clarke that the witness interviews "were pointing to a missile attack, a Stinger."¹² Since O'Neill died at the World Trade Center on September 11, Clarke could put whatever words in O'Neill's mouth he chose to. For the record, no witness ever mentioned a "Stinger." As early as July 22, CIA analysts and FBI agents had concluded that a missile "would have to come from a boat under the flight path" and would most likely have been "an IR SAM," meaning an Iranian surface-to-air missile.¹³ O'Neill was correct, however, in telling Clarke the FBI was convinced a missile had taken down the plane. This bears repeating. Within two weeks of the disaster, FBI agents had interviewed 144 "excellent" eyewitnesses and found the evidence for a missile strike "overwhelming." Clarke used his book to help scrub this information from the record. In the days following the crash, he wrote, "No intelligence surfaced that helped advance the investigation."¹⁴

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Clarke cited the small, shoulder-fired Stinger missile as a way of discrediting all terrorist or missile-related theories. The CIA memos showed its analysts taking the same tack with the FBI. "[TWA 800] was at 15,000 feet," Clarke reportedly told O'Neill. "No Stinger or any other missile like it can go that high." Confident no one in the media would challenge his numbers, Clarke did not bother to get the altitude of TWA 800 right or even consistently wrong. The actual altitude at the time of TWA's destruction was 13,760 feet. Although Clarke would pass himself off as a man above politics, the Clintons had seduced him if by no other means than granting him an access to power that George W. Bush never did. Clarke openly relished his role as a Clinton insider. A week after the crash, the president was telling Clarke and others that he was convinced terrorists had downed the plane and at that point, Clarke may not have known enough to disbelieve him. Soon, however, Clarke would become an active agent of disinformation. Based on his own timeline, he assumed this role a "few weeks later," or roughly a month after the crash. As Clarke related in his book, he...

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The mastermind of the plot was Islamic terrorist Ramzi Yousef. Yousef was on trial in New York for his role in Bojinka on the day TWA 800 went down. Although the plot's best-known feature was a scheme to blow up eleven American airliners over the Pacific, a secondary feature had Yousef and/or his cohorts chartering a plane, loading it with explosives, and crashing it into an American target.³ In moving these documents between offices, Patterson saw the president's hand-annotated response to Bojinka. "I can state for a fact that this information was circulated within the U.S. intelligence community," Patterson wrote, "and that in late 1996 the president was aware of it."⁴ Knowledge about the use of planes as bombs would emerge as a contentious issue during the 9/11 Commission hearings in 2004. As early as the summer of 1996 Clinton and his staff were aware of the threat. It is altogether likely that Clinton's review of these documents was related to TWA 800's destruction, if only to establish an alibi.

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Investigators knew how skilled the U.S. Navy was in retrieving these boxes and expected quick results. In February 1996, the Navy used a remote-control submersible vehicle to recover the CVR and FDR from Birgenair Flight 301, a Turkish charter plane that crashed off the coast of the Dominican Republic. The devices had sunk with the wreckage to a depth of 7200 feet. The FDR revealed in explicit detail the mechanical flaws that caused Birgenair 301 to crash, and the CVR recorded the pilots' desperate attempt to cope with the impending disaster. As in most crashes caused by mechanical failure, the cockpit drama lasted for several excruciating minutes. In this case, it began with one pilot saying, "There is something wrong, there are some problems," and it ended three minutes later with the other pilot crying out, "Oh, what's happening?"³¹ The FDR data proved just as revealing. Between them, the two devices told in inarguable detail the story of Birgenair 301's undoing. On the night of the TWA 800 crash, would-be rescue boats had picked up the distinctive "ping" from the black boxes' underwater locator beacon. The next morning, July 18, two NTSB investigators set out to find the boxes. This should not have been hard. The sea was smooth. The sky was crystal clear. The searchers used the latest in sounding devices. And the aircraft wreckage lay only 120 feet beneath the surface. Birgenair 301 had settled sixty times deeper. Wrote CNN's Negrone, "The men left the inlet that afternoon optimistic they'd soon have what they were after."³² They found nothing, heard nothing. The

New York Times expressed little curiosity about the delay, but the Long Island–based Newsday sensed something amiss. On July 22, the paper ran an article titled, “Divers Wait as Devices Scan Ocean.” According to Newsday, Navy divers still had not gone into the water. They had been relying instead on various remote devices that had yet to find the elusive boxes. “They should be down there diving,” a captain of a nearby diving boat operation told Newsday. “[Federal officials] said it was too rough out there, but my boat had 27 divers in the water on Saturday [July 20].”³³ Navy Captain Chip McCord told Newsday that those remote devices were a “quicker and better” way to locate the boxes, but in the first four days the Navy found nothing. Newsday paraphrased McCord as explaining, “Signals from the black boxes have not been heard because the devices are broken, destroyed or covered with sand or other material.” Whether intentionally or not, McCord was misleading the reporters. On July 24, two Navy divers finally went in. I have seen the underwater video of the Eureka moment, a moment Negroni described accurately enough. No sooner was the first diver lowered to the ocean floor, she wrote, than he saw “an orange box with FLIGHT RECORDER stenciled on its side.” Seconds later, the other diver “came into view. In his arms he carried another orange box.” Said diver Kevin Gelhafen, “Recovering...

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inconclusive. Some facts, however, speak for themselves. Most notable is the inexplicable failure of the CVR and FDR to reveal any crash-related information whatsoever. Another is a CIA intra-agency memo from early in the investigation in which an analyst expressed surprise that the recorders would go silent. “To get the electrical power to shut down,” wrote the anonymous analyst, “[a missile] would need to ‘miss’ the engines, and instead hit the electrical compartment by mistake.”³⁹ There was no evidence this happened. Finally, there is Executive Order 13039. Although the president preferred to work through his fixers, on March 11, 1997, Clinton quietly signed this order effectively removing all federal whistle-blower protection from anyone, civilian or military, associated with U.S. Navy “special warfare” operations.⁴⁰ This would include any Navy divers charged with moving the black boxes.

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The date of the executive order is worth considering. On the following day, March 12, the New York Times reported that government officials had “unleashed a pre-emptive strike” to neutralize an upcoming 57-page article in the Paris Match. That article explored in depth the Navy’s role in the destruction of TWA 800.⁴¹ The Times also noted that on the day before, March 11, the same day as Clinton’s executive order, the Riverside Press-Enterprise broke the story of James Sanders’s residue test. Having cause to fear the collapse of the cover-up,...

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What followed in the next several weeks was the most ambitious and successful cover-up in American peacetime history. At its quiet center was Gorelick. With the help of a complicit media, she and her cronies transformed a transparent missile strike into a mechanical failure of unknown origin. Given her role, the months after the crash had to have been emotionally harrowing. She did not know whether she would wake up one morning to find Washington Post reporters at her door eager to make her their John Mitchell or H. R. Haldeman. Perhaps such anxiety may have inspired her to leave the DOJ in January 1997. If so, the media missed the story. In an article on her departure, the New York Times failed to explain why the “hard-driving, efficient” deputy was stepping down or what she intended to do next. Nor did the paper mention her role in the TWA 800 investigation.⁴ There was nothing routine about Gorelick’s next career move. In May 1997, the Clintons found a way to reward their trusted deputy for her steely performance. To the best of my knowledge, not one reporter even questioned why a middling bureaucrat with no financial or housing experience would be handed the vice-chairmanship of Fannie Mae, a sinecure the Washington Monthly aptly called “the equivalent of winning the lottery.” Had the reporters inquired, they might have learned that Clinton had appointed five reliable hacks total to the Fannie Mae Board, including the chief of staff and deputy campaign manager from his 1992 campaign, a former White House aide, a major DNC fundraiser and Lincoln bedroom guest, and a GOP real estate mogul who endorsed Clinton in 1992. The Washington Monthly summarized a board appointment as “a nice way for a president to say ‘thank you’ to a political ally.” One does not have to be a conspiracy theorist to suspect that Clinton had something to do with Gorelick’s appointment. Gorelick would make \$877,573 in that first half-year alone.⁵ Another understated player in the TWA 800

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The memos the CIA released in response to various FOIA requests reveal the CIA's complete engagement in the investigation by the day after the crash. In that all names are redacted, I cannot tell whether Tenet sent or received any of these memos. He was sufficiently involved, however, to lend his imprimatur to agency disinformation by March 1997. That month Tenet sent FBI director Louis Freeh a letter assuring him that "what these eyewitnesses saw was the crippled aircraft after the first explosion had already taken place."⁷ This was eight months before the FBI shared the counterfeit CIA thesis with the public. For all the FBI's bluster and the NTSB's statutory authority, the CIA gave the impression of being the agency in charge. To secure a meeting with the analysts responsible for the zoom climb video, for instance, the NTSB's Jim Hall had to send a humble pie letter to Tenet explaining how NTSB group members would "appreciate learning more about the CIA's evaluation of witness statements."⁸ Hall sent this letter two years after Tenet informed Freeh as to what the witnesses were alleged to have seen. In March 1997 the White House rewarded Tenet for his faithful service by naming him director of central intelligence. Opined the New York Times, more accurately than its editors knew, "The rise of Mr. Tenet is proof of the rewards of being a loyal and obedient servant to one's boss, be he a senator, a spymaster or the President of the United States."⁹ For all their power within the administration,

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In April 2002, the former president called in his chits. He designated Berger as his representative to review intelligence documents in advance of the various hearings on 9/11. As a 2007 report by the House Committee on Government Oversight and Reform specified, Berger did not ask for this assignment, not at all.²¹ According to the archivists, Berger "indicated some disgust with the burden and responsibility of conducting the document review." The Clintons, however, had a hold on Berger. To appease them, he risked everything—his reputation, his livelihood, his very freedom. According to the House report, Berger made four trips to the National Archives. His stated reason for the visits was to prepare for his upcoming testimony before the Graham-Goss congressional committee and the 9/11 Commission. The first of his visits was in May 2002, the last in October 2003. He clearly left his mark. "The full extent of Berger's document removal," said the House report, "is not known and never can be known." In the absence of

substantive reporting by the major media, please allow me an informed speculation as to why Berger risked his all. On his first visit, according to Archives staff, "Berger was especially interested in White House terrorism advisor Richard Clarke's personal office files."²² According to the Committee, "Had Berger seen 'a smoking gun' or other documents he did not want brought to an investigatory panel's attention, he could have removed it on this visit." If there were a "smoking gun," it might well have involved the idea of using planes as bombs. Understandably, the 9/11 Commission was concerned about who knew what when in regards to the use of planes as bombs. Before the Atlanta Olympics, in fact, Clarke had warned security planners about the possibility of someone like Ramzi Yousef hijacking a 747 and flying it into Olympic Stadium.²³ Two days before the start of those Olympics, on July 17, Saddam's National Liberation Day, with the U.S. Navy on an extremely high state of alert, TWA Flight 800 blew up inexplicably off the coast of Long Island. The fact that the president was reviewing Bojinka plans soon after the destruction of TWA Flight 800 made the versions of those plans with his hand written notes on them all the more critical. If found and revealed, those plans, at the very least, would have shown the president's interest in the possible use of planes as bombs five years before September 11. Berger's task, I believe, was to make sure all references to Bojinka, planes-as-bombs, and/or TWA Flight 800 were rooted from the Archives, especially any documents with hand-written notes that led back to co-conspirators Berger, Clarke, Tenet, Gorelick, or Clinton. For what other reason would Berger have risked so much? Paul Brachfeld, the inspector general of the

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DOJ's failure to notify the commission set up one of the most bizarre days in the annals of American history—Wednesday, March 24, 2004. Testifying together before the commission were George Tenet, Richard Clarke, and Sandy Berger.²⁴ Evaluating their testimony was Jamie Gorelick, one of only ten commissioners. Berger had already been apprehended stealing and destroying documents that the commission was expected to review. The commission members, at least the Republicans, did not know this. This much was evident in Chairman Thomas Kean's initial exchange with Berger. "We are pleased to welcome before the commission

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The Republicans on the commission questioned Berger and Clarke about President Clinton's inaction after the bombing of the USS Cole and other terrorist attacks. In a dazzling display of political moxie, both men cited the false TWA 800 narrative to make their inaction seem virtuous. "We thought TWA 800 was terrorism," said Berger. "It was not terrorism. People actually—dozens of people saw the missile strike TWA 800 as it went up over Long Island." At this point, Commissioner John Lehman interjected, "Yes, but you just told us. . . ." Berger snapped back, "Preliminary judgments, I have come to learn, are not the same as judgments." Clarke elaborated on this theme in his defense of Berger. "He pointed out that in the days and weeks after the TWA 800 crash, we assumed it was a terrorist attack," said Clarke confidently. "There were eyewitnesses of what appeared to be a missile attack. But after exhaustive investigations that went on for years, in the case of the NTSB and the FBI, a determination was made that it was not a terrorist attack." With Berger having purged the files and with Gorelick monitoring the commission, Clarke had every reason to feel confident. Clarke came to the hearing well prepped. In this critical election year, several major media partisans had collaborated to turn this hitherto obscure bureaucrat into a celebrity swift boater. His soon-to-be-bestseller *Against All Enemies* had been published two days prior. He appeared on 60 Minutes the Sunday before the hearing and on Meet the Press the following Sunday. At every turn, he played the selfless public servant who, unlike President Bush, was man enough to apologize for failing to prevent 9/11. In testifying before Gorelick and her fellow commissioners, Clarke asked that intelligence analysts "be forgiven for not thinking about [aviation terror] given the fact that they hadn't seen a lot in the five or six years intervening about it." Of course, to think about aviation terror would have kept TWA 800 in the conversation. As the memoirs of the various participants suggest, no one wanted it there. Although Clarke talked about the crash in 2004, he helped kill the investigation in 1996. Berger and Gorelick signed on to make sure it stayed dead. Unfortunately, the Clintons and their cronies did so good a job burying the truth that no one passed information about potential aviation terror on to the next administration. This became apparent with the very first question posed to Bush national security advisor Condoleezza Rice in her appearance before the commission on April 8, 2004.²⁵ Asked Kean, "Did you ever see or hear from the FBI, from the CIA, from any other intelligence agency, any memos or discussions or anything else between the time you got into office and 9-11 that talked about using planes as bombs?" Rice had not. Tenet avoided the subject of TWA 800 at the hearing, but he caused

problems for Gorelick on another front. In explaining intelligence failures before 9/11, he...

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Less than a year later, Berger was back in the news. The global strategy firm over which he presided, Stonebridge International, added a new member to its advisory board. That member just happened to be the vice-chair of the 9/11 Commission, Lee Hamilton, a former congressman. The chutzpah of this appointment still astonishes. Berger had thoroughly sabotaged the work of the 9/11 Commission and then had the nerve to appoint the highest-ranking Democrat on that commission to the five-member advisory board of his private firm. Again, the media chose not to notice. The media failed to notice as well when Berger helped plot the political assassination of the one man in Washington most willing to expose his and the Clintons' criminal mischief, Rep. Curt Weldon, a ten-term Republican from Pennsylvania. In the process, the unrepentant Berger would help turn Congress over to the Democrats.

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As noted earlier, a July 30 CIA memo warned that the FBI was preparing a report pointing to a missile strike. After interviewing 144 witnesses, "mainly professionals," the FBI agents involved were convinced a shoulder-fired missile destroyed TWA 800. That same CIA memo held another surprise. After TWA 800 went down, the FBI received reports from four other witnesses claiming to have seen "a similar surface-to-air something" launched on July 7. "If true," said the CIA analyst, "the FBI would now have witnesses reporting seeing something race towards the sky on the 7th, 12th and 17th."³ Assuming these sightings to be genuine, the analyst reviewed the various reasons as to why a terrorist with a shoulder-fired missile might have wanted to shoot off a missile on three separate occasions, each five days apart. There was no talk of the Navy. As with virtually all evidence that threatened

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