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What We Fight To Protect

Before they died on Flight 93, Jeremy Glick, Thomas Burnett Jr. and Todd Beamer did something characteristically American. So characteristic, in fact, it has passed almost unnoticed.

Leaderless, armed only with only plastic butter knives, knowing a wrong move would risk their own and others' lives, at least three guys did what Americans do: They voted.

They voted to jump the hijacker with the (perhaps fake) red bomb strapped to his chest. "Let's roll," Todd Beamer was overheard by a GTE supervisor saying. Moments before, Beamer and the GTE supervisor did something else characteristically American: They prayed. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me."

Thirty-five thousand feet below and to the north, voting had been suspended in New York City's mayoral primary, as the twin towers crumbled to dust.

Yet what an amazing feat of engineering! Gleaming 110-story towers hit by jumbo jets half again as huge as what the towers were designed to withstand. Yet the towers stood, bleeding smoke and fire, long enough to allow 15,000 or more New Yorkers to evacuate before the laws of physics finally brought the walls tumbling, crumbling down.

Here is another difference between us and the barbarians: They had no tools capable even of tearing down such heights of human glory. They had to borrow our own achievements to use against us. They think our strength lies in the visible sphere, in objects they can bomb to rubble. Fools. We built those towers, we can rebuild them -- or something even grander.

Minutes later Flight 93 crashed into Pennsylvania countryside. My first thought: Remember these men. They saved the White House. Now I think they saved us from something worse: the confusion, horror and lack of clarity that would result if our own military had had to shoot down an airliner. That, I suspect, was the hijackers' plan all along: Why wander as far as Cleveland before doubling back for Washington? Surely they knew American fighter planes would be airborne an hour after the World Trade Center assault.

The pundits who criticize Bush's initial performance are living in a lost world, where the president's primary job was to feel our pain. No more. After Tuesday, the president has a more important job. His job is to transform the unfocused rage of America into a sustained and disciplined assault on and victory over the forces responsible for this and other acts of terrorism against the U.S. Past administrations have let these acts of terrorism go unchallenged like the bombing of our embassies, the attack on the U.S.S. Cole and the 1993 World Trade Center bombings. I don't want another round of emotive bombing. I want to win.

A war president. That is the president I have seen in Bush, who understood on Tuesday, Sept. 11, that his most important job was not public appearances, flying to D.C. to boost morale, but preserving the American military chain of command in the middle of an attack whose magnitude was at that point unknown.

Lawmakers said the measure was consistent with the so-called War Powers Act, which states only Congress can declare war. In recent history, presidents have asked for congressional approval before major military operations largely to build support. White House press secretary Ari Fleischer said Bush "has authority vested in him to take actions as he deems appropriate," but wanted to see Congress pass a use-of-force resolution as "a show of unity."