



Getting the Facts Straight

Father Stephen McGraw had taken a wrong turn on his way to Arlington National Cemetery the morning of September 11, 2001. After taking the Pentagon exit onto Washington Boulevard, Fr. McGraw found himself mired in traffic, stewing impatiently over being late for a planned graveside service. Suddenly the priest heard a deafening roar as a large aircraft passed directly over the roof of his car. "It looked like a plane coming in for a landing ... I mean, in the sense that it was controlled and sort of straight," recalled Fr. McGraw.

The priest "looked out just as the plane clipped an overhead sign and then toppled a light pole, injuring a taxi driver a few feet away," recounts investigative author James Bamford in his new book *A Pretext for War*. "A second later, American Flight 77 smashed into the gray concrete wall of the Pentagon. The jet hit with such force that it penetrated four of the five concentric rings of corridors and offices surrounding a gazebo in the center court, long nicknamed Ground Zero."

"I saw it crash into the building," testifies the priest. "There was an explosion and a loud noise, and I felt the impact. I remember seeing a fireball come out of two windows.... I saw an explosion of fire billowing through those two windows. I remember hearing a gasp or scream from one of the other cars near me. Almost a collective gasp, it seemed."

That "collective gasp" was wrenched from the throats of numerous witnesses who — like Father McGraw — saw the crash with their own eyes, heard the explosions with their own ears, and felt the percussive aftershock with their own bodies.

"Did you see that?" exclaimed Aydan Kizildrgli, a student from Turkey who had also been snarled in traffic. Notes Bamford: "Traffic along the highway came immediately to a halt as people jumped out of their cars and began putting their cell phones to their ears. Stunned and dazed, Kizildrgli left his car on the road and began walking aimlessly for half an hour."

Also among the eyewitnesses were Dan Creed and two colleagues from Oracle Software, who, seated in a car near the Naval Annex, watched in horrified wonder as the hijacked plane dived, leveled off, and struck the Pentagon next door. Telling his story to the Phoenix, Arizona, *Ahwatukee Foothills News*, Creed recalled the dreadful events. "It was no more than 30 feet off the ground, and it was screaming. It was just screaming. It was nothing more than a guided missile at that point," said Creed.

Moments later, the plane struck the Pentagon, killing all 64 of its passengers and crew. The crash took the lives of another 125 people on the ground. "I can still see the plane. I can still see it right now. It's just the most frightening thing in the world, going full speed, going full throttle, its wheels up," Creed recalled.

Frank Probst, an employee of the Pentagon Renovation Program Office, was outside the Pentagon on the morning of September 11, 2001. In an interview with the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), Probst gave his own eyewitness account. He had been watching live television coverage of the second plane hitting the World Trade Center tower in one of the construction site trailers.

Around 9:30 a.m., Probst left the trailer and (as paraphrased in an ASCE report) "began walking to the Modular Office Compound ... located beyond the extreme north end of the Pentagon" for a 10 o'clock meeting. Approaching the heliport, he looked over and saw "a plane flying low over the Annex and heading right for him." Understandably, Probst "hit the ground and observed the right wing tip pass through the portable 750 kW generator" that provided backup power to a portion of the Pentagon. He



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saw the right engine take out “the chain-link fence and posts surrounding the generator.” The left engine, he said, “struck an external steam vault before the fuselage entered the building.”

Probst described to the ASCE how, “as the fireball from the crash moved toward him,” he ran toward the South Parking Lot. He said that he fell down twice, and while running, “fine pieces of wing debris floated down about him.” He only saw “fire and smoke within the building at the point of impact.”

The ASCE also interviewed Don Mason, another employee of the Pentagon Renovation Program Office. At the time of the crash, Mason was “stopped in traffic west of the building,” according to the ASCE account of his story. “The plane approached low,” flying “directly” over him, “possibly clipping the antenna of the vehicle immediately behind him.” It also “struck three light poles between him and the building.”

Mason, the ASCE recounted, said that he saw his colleague Probst “directly in the plane’s path, and he witnessed a small explosion as the portable generator was struck by the right wing.” He also recalled “seeing the tail of the plane” as it entered the building, followed by a “fireball that erupted” upon the plane’s impact.

Pentagate?

With eyewitness testimony like this, it’s hard to see how anyone could believe that American Airlines Flight 77 did not hit the Pentagon. Shockingly, though, that’s just what a growing number of people have been led to believe. A number of websites claim that the twin-engine Boeing 757 did not crash into the Pentagon. Their theories range from truck bombs and pre-set on-site explosive charges to remotely controlled aircraft and missile attacks.

It is not just the events of 9/11 at the Pentagon, however, that have people scratching their heads. Americans are inundated each day with a veritable torrent of information, both true and false. There has been a marked proliferation of 24-hour news channels, a renaissance in talk radio, and a deluge of information on the Internet. Moreover, there has been an explosion in consumer goods and an accompanying explosion in advertising related to those goods and services. We are bombarded with claims and counterclaims. Oftentimes it is exceedingly difficult to separate the hype from the truth.

The problem applies to alternative news media as well as mainstream media. The former are wont to publish all manner of conjecture and theory, often based on only the slimmest, often misconstrued, bits of “evidence.” For instance, it is true that our nation and our liberties are threatened by a cabal of establishment Insiders bent on creating a socialist world government. Many alternative media outlets, however, persist in perpetuating “conspiracy theories” that are untrue and misleading. This is particularly true of the assertion that Flight 77 did not hit the Pentagon.

Americans mindful of the dangers threatening the founding ideals of this nation need be especially cautious in such matters. The hazards can be illustrated by applying Gresham’s Law. In economics, this law teaches that bad money drives out good. In the information society, bad information drives out good information. The proliferation of misinformation causes the dilution of good, factual information. Valuable information on actual cover-ups, for instance, is discredited when other alleged, but non-factual and misleading, conspiracy theories are given undue currency. In short, bad conspiracy theories discredit all assertions of conspiracy, making for fertile ground in which actual conspiracies thrive.

The assertion that American Airlines Flight 77 did not hit the Pentagon achieved notoriety following the publication in France of *l’Effroyable Imposture* by French journalist Thierry Meyssan. The book, published in the U.S. as *9/11: The Big Lie*, was an immediate sensation in France, becoming, as *Time*



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Europe noted, that nation's number one best-seller. The book has since catalyzed an explosion of websites and alternative publications making similar claims. For his part, Meyssan claims that the official explanation of the Pentagon's damage — that the hijacked airliner crashed into the building — is "a loony tale constructed in bits and pieces, one lie leading to another."

Instead of providing an alternative explanation, however, he simply demanded that the U.S. come clean. "The official version is only propaganda," he wrote. "But the facts remain that 125 persons died at the Pentagon and that an airplane carrying 64 passengers disappeared. What became of American Airlines flight 77? Are the passengers dead? If so, who killed them and why? If not, where are they? The U.S. administration should address all these questions."

Such questions, of course, ignore publicly available evidence, including the fact that some passenger remains were found. Diagrams presented by the American Society of Civil Engineers, in its report entitled *The Pentagon Building Performance Report*, show the relative positions of passenger remains found within the damaged structure of the Pentagon.

By applying certain principles, it is possible to evaluate the validity of a given news report, press release, advertisement, conspiracy theory, or other claim. In fact, the 9/11 crash at the Pentagon provides a sort of laboratory with which to demonstrate these principles of critical thinking.

Evaluating Meyssan's Work

In essence, Meyssan states that there is no evidence for the official version of events, then assumes on that basis that the official version must be false. Historian David Hackett Fischer categorizes such reasoning as "the fallacy of the negative proof," wherein a person argues that "'there is no evidence that X is the case,' and then proceeds to affirm or assume that not-X is the case." In such instances all that is proven, Fischer notes, is that there "is no evidence of X."

Unfortunately for Meyssan, there is plenty of evidence regarding what happened at the Pentagon on 9/11. The U.S. government did, in fact, answer Meyssan's questions in the form of the "official version" of events. By asking such questions in *l'Effroyable Imposture*, published in the U.S. as *9/11: The Big Lie*, Meyssan makes a ham-handed, almost absurd, attempt to lead readers to conclude that no explanation for that day's events had yet been offered.

Having come under fire for *9/11: The Big Lie*, Meyssan and his organization released a subsequent book, *Pentagate*, that more fully develops his critique of the attack on the Pentagon. The analysis provided in *Pentagate* makes attempts on multiple fronts to convince readers that the conventional explanation of the damage at the Pentagon is faulty. According to the book:

- Witness testimony indicates that a missile was responsible for the damage. "In all cases," the book concludes, "these testimonies concerning the sound and the trajectory also correspond perfectly with the manner in which a missile flies in the final phase of flight, just before it strikes its target."
- There is no debris from the plane, and the wings, which should have sheared off, are nowhere to be seen.
- The damage at the Pentagon could have been caused by a missile but not by a plane. "The building was not smashed into as if it had suffered from a classic plane crash," Meyssan writes in *Pentagate*, "but was perforated as if struck by a missile."
- Civilian sources did not know where Flight 77 was after 9:09 a.m. on 9/11. Consequently, civilian flight control, the FAA, "could not have known that the plane turned back [toward Washington, D.C.]



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since it had become, by the agency's own admission, invisible to its eyes...."

- The U.S. military did not destroy the plane, despite having the capability to do so.

By attempting to develop these five points in greater detail, Meyssan attempts to lead readers to the conclusion that a missile, fired by the U.S. armed forces, hit the Pentagon.

Consistent Witness Testimony

A very basic means of judging the validity of any story is the ability to identify multiple named witnesses who each attest, in consistent fashion, to the various "facts" at issue. How does Meyssan measure up to this requirement? The answer: not very well.

In fact, though he asserts that the Pentagon was hit by a missile and not an airplane, he does not cite even a single witness claiming to have seen a missile. His only "evidence" for the missile theory are descriptive similes used by witnesses who attested to seeing a *plane* but who compared the plane to a missile. For instance, he quotes *USA Today* reporter Joel Sucherman, who saw the plane as it raced toward its target. According to Sucherman, "whoever was flying the plane made no attempt to change direction. It was coming in at a high rate of speed, but not at a steep angle — almost like a heat-seeking missile was locked on its target and staying dead on course."

Meyssan also quotes another *USA Today* reporter, Mike Walter, who saw the plane crash into the Pentagon. As to the plane's behavior, Walter recalled that he saw "a plane, a plane from American Airlines. I thought: 'That's not right, it's really low.' And I saw it. I mean, it was like a cruise missile with wings." Based on these and other witnesses who described the plane's behavior by using missile similes, Meyssan concludes, "In all cases, these testimonies concerning the sound and the trajectory also correspond perfectly with the manner in which a missile flies in the final phase of flight, just before it strikes its target."

If the witnesses are not saying that they saw a missile, what are they saying? Sucherman, in stating that the plane seemed "like a heat-seeking missile" that "was locked on its target" was not saying that it was a heat-seeking missile, but was simply describing in an emphatic manner the fact that the plane did not deviate from its course. The same applies to Mike Walter's statement that he saw "a plane, a plane from American Airlines," which "was like a cruise missile with wings." To anyone with even a basic grasp of the English language, Sucherman and Walter are speaking metaphorically. Either Meyssan does not understand the use of metaphor in English, or he is being disingenuous.

The Scene of the Crime

The most intriguing points of the theory proposed by Meyssan and others that the Pentagon was not struck by a jetliner are to be found at the scene of the crime. According to Meyssan, the damage to the building was not extensive enough to have been caused by a giant airliner moving at speeds of more than 350 mph (more than 500 mph according to the "official version"), and there are no discernable pieces of the aircraft remaining, as should have been the case if the Pentagon was hit by a plane. Both claims are based on misinterpretations and factual errors.

As to the extent of damage at the Pentagon, in *9/11: The Big Lie*, Meyssan provides an aerial photo showing the collapsed section of the outer ring of the Pentagon with an outline of a jetliner superimposed on the image. Referring to this graphic, he writes: "If one superimposes the plane's outline onto the satellite photo ... it can be seen that only the nose of the Boeing entered the building. The fuselage and the wings remained outside." He goes on in this vein, stating: "The plane was stopped



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dead, without its wings having struck the façade. There is no visible trace of any impact except that from the Boeing's nose. We should thus be able to see the wings and the fuselage outside, on the lawn in fact."

In his subsequent book, *Pentagate*, he argues that the scale of the damage to the façade of the building was too small to have been caused by the Boeing airliner. This estimation is based largely on an analysis of a photo taken prior to the building's collapse that shows the entry hole punched through the building. In the photo the entry hole is visible extending to the top of the second floor and ending just shy of two of the third floor windows. Only the top of the hole, corresponding roughly with the level of the second floor, is visible. The lower portion of the impact site is entirely obscured in the photo by a heavy jet of water being sprayed across the building's façade by a fire truck.

Meyssan alleges from this that the entry hole was too small to have been made by a Boeing 757. "The impact itself is nevertheless quite narrow," he writes. "It extends from ground level to the first floor of the building (about 25 feet high). [Note that what Americans refer to as the second floor, Europeans call the first floor.] Its width corresponds to that of two windows above (about 17 to 20 feet wide)." He concludes: "The aircraft that passed through this orifice thus measured less than 17 to 20 feet in diameter. That could correspond to the passenger cabin of a Boeing 757-200 which in fact measures 11.5 feet. But this plane also possesses wings that give a total breadth of 125 feet." The inference, of course, is that Flight 77 could not have caused the damage to the façade of the Pentagon.

In fact, the photo presented as evidence by Meyssan in support of this analysis is misleading, because the ground floor of the building is obscured. Other photos were taken of the façade before the collapse that show much greater damage that does fit the profile of an aircraft. Damage below the two windows cited by Meyssan and extending through the floor above ground level clearly corresponds to the entry point of the fuselage, while to the left and right of this area damage caused by the wings is clearly visible.

Though the Pentagon survived the impact remarkably well, the plane cut a vast swath of destruction throughout the affected portion of the structure. The building, it should be noted, is built of steel reinforced concrete and masonry throughout, supported by narrowly spaced, spirally reinforced concrete columns varying in thickness from 14 to 21 inches, with the larger columns, naturally, to be found in the first story.

The load-bearing columns support a slab, beam, and girder system of flooring. While not a fortress, the construction of the Pentagon is substantial and massive. The building is constructed of 680,000 tons of sand and gravel that were used to make the steel-reinforced concrete. Each of the five sides of the building then contains more than 100,000 tons of structural building components. The Boeing aircraft, by comparison, weighed nearly 100 tons and, like any aircraft, was of much lighter aluminum and composite construction, as befitting a vehicle meant to fly.

The American Society of Civil Engineers described the impact site and the damage in their comprehensive report on the crash. According to the report, "Most of the serious structural damage was within a swath that was approximately 75 to 80 ft wide and extended approximately 230 ft into the first floor of the building. This swath was oriented at approximately 35 to 40 degrees perpendicular to the exterior wall of the Pentagon. Within the swath of serious damage was a narrower, tapering area that contained most of the very severe structural damage. This tapering area approximated a triangle in plan and had a width of approximately 90 ft at the aircraft's entry point and a length of approximately 230 ft along the trajectory of the aircraft through the building."



No Evidence of a Missile

Because Meyssan misleadingly downplays the damage to the building, he is able to argue that the damage was caused by a missile. But here again is another example of faulty logic. In a section of *Pentagate* written by Pierre-Henri Bunel, the author notes that the damage at the Pentagon “resembles the effects of anti-concrete hollow charges....” There is no witness testimony presented indicating that anyone saw a cruise missile.

Though many people saw an American Airlines plane fly into the Pentagon, no one is quoted as having seen a military plane launch a missile and there is no indication that one was fired either from land or sea-based launch systems. The assertion that a missile damaged the Pentagon is based solely on the fact that the explosion and resulting damage at the Pentagon have some similarities with those caused by cruise missile warheads.

In a sense, this argument takes the form of what historian David Hackett Fischer calls the “fallacy of the possible proof.” This fallacy, Fischer notes, consists of attempting to demonstrate that a proposition is true or false solely “by establishing the possibility of its truth or falsity.” For instance, it is possible for it to snow in North Dakota on June 1. It does not follow from this possibility that it did actually snow in North Dakota on June 1. Similarly, it is possible that a missile hit the Pentagon. Unfortunately, admitting the possibility of such is not the same as proving that it actually happened — particularly when eyewitnesses, including those cited by Meyssan, unambiguously reported seeing a plane.

To take it to the next step and prove that such an event actually occurred, it would be necessary to cite evidence supporting the assertion. It has already been noted that witnesses unambiguously reported seeing a plane hit the Pentagon and not a missile. Likewise, there is no physical evidence that would both support the missile theory and undermine the official explanation that Flight 77 was responsible for the damage.

Meyssan attempts to skirt this issue, but faulty logic again thwarts his analysis. He cites the statements of firefighters who stated, “The only way you could tell that an aircraft was inside was that we saw pieces of the nose gear.” He then quotes Arlington County fire chief Ed Plaughter, who in a statement to the press on September 12, 2001 said, “We have what we believe is a puddle right there that the — what we believe to be the nose of the aircraft....”

A few lines later, Meyssan makes the critical leap in logic. “In contrast to the fragile nose of a plane, the heads of certain missiles are extremely resistant. This debris that firemen said they saw and that they had trouble identifying as the nose of the plane could well have been the warhead of a missile.” What is the fatal flaw in this statement? The warhead happens to be the portion of the weapon that contains the explosive charge. Had a missile detonated inside the Pentagon, there would not be a warhead remaining to be found by firefighters. Meyssan can’t have his cake and eat it too.

Moreover, though Meyssan argues that there is no debris from the plane located near or inside the Pentagon, witnesses have attested to the existence of such debris, and some of that debris even appears in the photographic record. In addition to landing gear, engine components, and the plane’s “black boxes,” chunks of aluminum and other plane debris were found inside the damaged section of the building.

Occam’s Razor

There are still other problems with Meyssan’s analysis. He notes correctly, for instance, that Flight 77 was lost to FAA controllers after the hijackers turned off the plane’s transponder. He insists, however,



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that because the controllers lost the flight, no evidence exists that the plane was turned toward Washington. This, too, is not true. In fact, the *9/11 Commission Report* points out that, "According to the radar reconstruction, American 77 reemerged as a primary target on Indianapolis Center radar scopes at 9:05, east of its last known position. The target remained in Indianapolis Center's airspace for another six minutes, then crossed into the western portion of Washington Center's airspace at 9:10."

In yet another example of the "fallacy of the possible proof," Meyssan alleges that because the U.S. military did not prevent Flight 77 from reaching the Pentagon, despite the fact that it is the most powerful and sophisticated military organization in the world, the U.S. armed forces must, therefore, have purposefully facilitated the attack. Strictly speaking, this absurd suggestion fits the basic description of a "possibility." Once again, however, the necessity of an event does not follow from its possibility.

Overall, however, the Meyssan theory fails its most important test. A 14th-century philosopher, William of Occam, formulated the principle ("Occam's razor") that the best explanation of observed phenomena is the simplest. Of the two competing explanations for the events at the Pentagon and on Flight 77, one posits that the plane struck the building at a high rate of speed causing both the disintegration of the plane and the destruction on the ground. The other, Meyssan's theory, argues that the plane did not hit the Pentagon but disappeared. Not only does the extant evidence run counter to this theory, but it does not account for some of the observed phenomena, does not explain what happened to the plane and its passengers, and is manifestly more complex.

It is safe to say that the thesis advocated by Thierry Meyssan, that Flight 77 did not hit the Pentagon, is a tour de force of obfuscation and misinterpretation. Meyssan has nevertheless attracted a bevy of adherents who have based their own interpretations and theories on his. Just how prevalent this theory has become can be confirmed quickly with a Web search. Such a search turns up very little useful information but returns a veritable mountain of misinformation.

This, in fact, underscores the problem. Modern society is awash in a rapidly expanding sea of information, and it has become increasingly more difficult to identify information that is reliable, factual and useful. Nevertheless, it is essential to identify reliable information sources and carefully evaluate their material. What is the background of the source? Does the source have a track record of reliability? Is the story verifiable? Are witnesses named, or are they anonymous? Does the story match known or observed phenomena, or does it run counter to these? Are there elements of the story that you know to be true — or know not to be true? Has the source consistently employed fallacious reasoning?

Failure to carefully weigh the reliability of information sources by asking these and other questions exposes patriotic Americans to the possibility of being misled and marginalized, an outcome to be avoided if the tide toward collectivism is to be reversed.



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