

After full-scale security alert is imposed

Engine failure suspected in New York plane crash

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According to US authorities, a preliminary assessment—including the analysis of the cockpit voice recorder—indicates that Monday morning’s crash of an American Airlines flight in New York City was the result of mechanical failure and not a terrorist attack. The tragedy, which killed more than 260 people, occurred only two minutes after Flight 587 took off from Kennedy International Airport bound for Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. Nearly all the passengers on board were Dominicans.

The airplane crashed in the Rockaway section of Queens, destroying several houses. As many as nine people from the neighborhood are still missing. The airbus A300 apparently broke into pieces in the air, a rare occurrence in modern aviation. The two General Electric CF6 engines landed in separate locations, several blocks apart. Smoke from the burning wreckage could be seen for miles.

Aviation experts expect that National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) officials will pay particular attention to the possibility of engine failure in the crash of Flight 587. The GE engine model has a history of “uncontained failures” over the past 20 years. In 1989, an earlier version of the engine failed on a United Airlines DC-10 outside Sioux City, Iowa, killing 112 people. In June 2000 a Varig Brasil Airlines plane was preparing for takeoff in Sao Paolo when an engine rupture damaged the aircraft’s landing gear and fuel lines. Last year during a ground test of a Boeing 747 at the Philadelphia airport, the engine blew up.

In April 2000 a Continental DC-10, with three CF6 engines, had one engine break apart as it took off from Newark airport. Pieces from that engine damaged a second engine. The crew landed the plane and there were no injuries.

As a result of such problems, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has increased inspection requirements for similar engines. The FAA published a safety notice in the Federal Register on October 5 stating that there was a need

for mandatory inspections of the CF6-80C2 engine because “an unsafe condition has been identified.” It gave the public 60 days, until December 4, to comment before ordering more extensive and more frequent inspections.

CF6 engines are also used on the Airbus A310, A330 and the Boeing MD-11, DC-10, 747 and 767, as well as on Air Force One.

The airplane on ill-fated Flight 587 was 13 years old; it had undergone a maintenance check the day before the crash. One of the engines had flown 694 hours; the other 9,788. Airplane engines are typically overhauled every 10,000 hours.

The crash in Queens, coming only two months and a day after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, provided federal and local authorities with an opportunity to implement their new security plans. New York was placed on Level 1 alert—the highest level—by outgoing Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, after consultation with George W. Bush. The city was essentially sealed off: all bridges and tunnels were closed to incoming traffic, the two airports were closed, the Empire State Building (now the city’s tallest structure) was evacuated, the United Nations was partially locked down, security at government buildings and nuclear power plants was tightened and military fighter jets patrolled the skies. After several hours, when the initial investigation suggested that the crash was an accident, the measures were lifted.

At the White House, Homeland Security director Thomas Ridge convened a videoconference with top officials: Attorney General John Ashcroft; FBI Director Robert Mueller; Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta; Federal Emergency Management Agency director Joe Allbaugh; Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz; and FAA chief Jane F. Garvey. The group met for two hours and reportedly considered grounding all aircraft nationwide, but the idea was rejected as incoming information suggested a mechanical failure on Flight 587. The NTSB was given

responsibility for the investigation, not the FBI, another signal that the crash was not seen as the work of terrorists.

As far as the Bush administration is concerned, it is all to the good that the American population accustoms itself to the presence of security and military forces and restrictions on movement and civil liberties. Reflecting this view, Robert McFadden in the *New York Times* commented, “the swift imposition of a broad defensive security shield that would have been unthinkable only a few months ago seemed appropriate—even normal—in the new world of living with terrorism.” McFadden also noted that at the Empire State Building in mid-Manhattan, “It had all happened before. ‘You just have to accept it,’ Drake Asklar, a clothing designer, said. ‘This is about the fifth or sixth time we’ve been evacuated.’”

Defense officials claimed that they did not increase fighter patrols over New York after Monday’s airliner crash. However, Maj. Barry Venable, a spokesman for the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), declined to tell the *Associated Press* whether any fighter pilots or supporting aircraft witnessed or responded to the American Airlines crash. NORAD planes have been constantly in the air since September 11; more than 100 fighters at 26 air bases are on high alert, able to launch fully loaded within 15 minutes.

The *Washington Post* reported that military jets escorted a United Airlines plane with 90 people aboard to the airport in Denver on Monday after Flight 1145 failed to respond to an inquiry. The plane landed without incident. US Airways Flight 969 from Pittsburgh to Reagan National Airport in Washington, DC was diverted to Dulles International Airport (also in Washington) when a passenger left his seat less than 30 minutes before landing. An on-board sky marshal detained the individual and the plane landed safely.

The news that the American Airlines crash was apparently not the product of terrorism was generally greeted with relief by the media. “‘Accident’ Would Be Good News,” read a *New York Daily News* headline. The *Times* in an editorial observed, “It is a striking commentary on the nation’s altered state that news of an airplane accident could come as somewhat of a relief.”

Besides revealing the generally indifferent attitude of the US media toward the Dominican passengers and their families, this highlights the manipulative character of the entire “war against terrorism.” The government and the media turn the hysteria off and on for their own purposes. On Monday they chose for the most part to downplay the terrorist threat. Sensitivity to criticism about some of the Bush administration’s previous tactics may have played a role. Ronald Brownstein in the *Los Angeles Times* approvingly commented, “After being accused of initially

under-reacting to the threat of anthrax in the mail early last month—and then of overreacting by issuing general warnings of possible terrorist attacks later in the month—the White House appeared to find a more effective balance Monday, not only in words but also in actions.”

There are serious worries about the state of the US airline industry and American in particular. Economists who follow the airlines predicted that the crash could force bankruptcies in an already crisis-wracked industry. Darryl Jenkins of George Washington University’s Aviation Institute said, “I honestly believe we’re going to have fewer airlines by the end of the year.”

Before the crash of Flight 587 the US airline industry was expected to lose some \$5 billion in 2001, compared to a profit of about \$2.5 last year. During this year’s third quarter the nine largest carriers reported a combined loss of \$2.43 billion. Since September 11 the airlines have eliminated some 100,000 jobs out of a workforce of 1.2 million and reduced capacity on average by 20 percent by parking larger planes and eliminating less profitable routes. Airline traffic is expected to decline between 5 and 10 percent for the remainder of the year.

Airline stocks have plunged 40 percent since September 11, and fell farther on Monday. Shares in American Airlines’ parent, AMR Corp., quickly dropped 17 percent before recovering slightly and closing down 9 percent.

The crash is disastrous for American, two of whose planes were used in the attacks on New York and Washington. The company lost \$144 million in the third quarter, the worst performance in its history. It has eliminated 20,000 jobs. American has been filling 60 to 65 percent of its seats, but these are on smaller planes and at lower prices.



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