

Rebuttal to Kevin Ryan on Plausibility of 9/11 Hijackings

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Introduction

In response to my request for revision¹ submitted to the International Center for 9/11 Justice (IC911J), Kevin Ryan argues² that my central contention in that paper is false; namely, that it is probable that the four hijacker teams could have overpowered the pilots on each flight, and gained control of the aircrafts on 9/11. He argues that I have not sufficiently demonstrated this, claiming my references do not support my conclusions, and there is evidence I've overlooked that contradicts my arguments. Here I show that it is Mr. Ryan's claims which are false, and not sufficiently supported by the evidence he cites. As we shall see, Mr. Ryan's response contains numerous factual errors, logical fallacies, irrelevant details, and misunderstandings of what I actually said in my original paper.

Criticism of Sources

In my original paper, I argued that the hijackers could have gained control of the aircrafts due to the lack of training the pilots would have had with regards to the type of hijackings that took place. Specifically, prior to 9/11, pilots were trained to deal with so-called "traditional hijackings," whereby the hijackers intend to essentially hold the airplane and its occupants for ransom until their demands are met. Such training mainly involved de-escalation tactics on the part of the pilots and crew, and peaceful negotiations with the hijackers, rather than physical confrontations, which were in fact discouraged. This contrasts with "martyrdom" or "suicide" hijackings, whereby the intention is to use the aircraft itself as a weapon in order to kill everyone onboard, including themselves.

In my paper, I primarily (though not entirely) relied on statements from the 9/11 Commission Report and Commission Staff notes to support the claim that pilots were only trained to deal with the first type of hijacking, but not the second. Mr. Ryan argues this does not sufficiently support my claims, and also cites sections of the Commission Report that appear to contradict me. There are at least two problems with this approach.

First, Mr. Ryan implies in passing that the Commission Report is unreliable, given that it's "widely regarded as a cover-up." However, he then goes on to cite that *same Report* in an attempt to rebut my claims. In essence, Mr. Ryan employs a "having it both ways" type strategy, which is not inherently fallacious, but starts to look so here. No justification is given for why the sections of the Report he cites are any more reliable than the ones I cite. As we will see, the sections I cite are indeed more trustworthy, as they can be corroborated by other sources. As we will also see, the sections Mr. Ryan relies upon are based largely on speculations and uncertainties, and thus should be regarded as less reliable.

Second, the idea that the Report is a cover-up is somewhat belied by the fact that Mr. Ryan is able to use it to dispute the mainstream account of 9/11 in the first place. Afterall, if the Report were as much of a cover-up as Mr. Ryan suggests, why would they include details that appear, at first glance, to create problems for what we could call the "official narrative"? Why not simply

concoct a scenario that would leave no doubt in readers' minds that the hijackers could have successfully overpowered the pilots and gained control of the aircrafts?

Regardless of these logical issues, the question still remains as to the legitimacy of the sources I cited. As the sections of the Report I cited make clear, their information largely comes from the FAA. Thus, if anything from the Report were inaccurate, officials from the FAA could easily dispute it publicly. To the best of my knowledge, this has not happened. Unless Mr. Ryan wishes to claim the FAA is also part of the cover-up, we have good reason to accept the Commission's discussions as accurate. However, if Mr. Ryan still finds this unsatisfactory, there are indeed sources we can turn to which predate the 9/11 Commission, and even 9/11 itself.

- A 2002 article published in the *Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy* states "it was believed that the incidents [hijackings] were best dealt with by rational negotiation, emphasizing compromise rather than confrontation on the flight deck."³
- On September 12th, 2001, a CNN report noted that "Airline pilots are trained to handle such situations [hijackings] by keeping calm, complying with requests, and if possible, dialing in an emergency four digit code on a device called a transponder."⁴
- In 1985, the Christian Science Monitor interviewed several pilots and airline officials about how best to handle a hijacking.⁵ A few choice quotes include:
 - "You don't do anything to provoke or anger the hijacker. To the extent possible, you try to accommodate their demands. No heroics."
 - "Interference could be disastrous – no one wants any fireworks at 30,000 feet."
 - "Going along with the hijacker and not endangering aircraft or passengers has proven a method better than resistance."
- In 1969, the International Federation of Air Line Pilots' Associations issued a statement saying that in the case of hijackings, "To oppose violence with violence, in the particularly vulnerable circumstances of flight, is regarded as being on balance more dangerous than to carry out a hijacker's instructions."⁶
- In 1968, the House Committee on Foreign Affairs concluded that, in the event of a hijacking, pilots and crew should "comply with the demands presented," and not "attempt to disarm, shoot out, or otherwise jeopardize the safety of the flight."⁷

Sources such as these should leave no doubt that the common view amongst pilots was not to engage the hijackers and attempt to physically stop them, but to accommodate their demands. Note as well that the last two sources corroborate the Commission's claim that this so-called "common strategy" of dealing with hijackings "had been elaborated over decades of experience with scores of hijackings, beginning in the 1960s."⁸ If Mr. Ryan has information that contradicts any of the above, then I respectfully ask he provide it. Otherwise, I maintain the central point of my original paper stands.

Nonetheless, Mr. Ryan argues there are sections of the Report that actually contradict my claims of the plausibility of the hijackers successfully overtaking the aircrafts. He quotes at length from a post at his "Dig Within" blog, presenting evidence that the hijackers would have had difficulty entering the cockpits.⁹ Contrary to his assertions, however, nothing he cites demonstrates the hijackers' success was "exceedingly improbable."

- Mr. Ryan quotes the Commission Report as admitting they "do not know exactly how the hijackers gained access to the cockpit" on Flight 11, and that "FAA rules required that the

doors remained closed and locked during the flight.” He further notes that, based on the testimony of flight attendant Betty Ong, “the Commission report speculates that they might have ‘jammed their way in.’” This, Mr. Ryan argues, is problematic, since “breaking down the locked cockpit door would certainly have given the professional flight crew plenty of time to enter the four-digit hijack ‘squawk code’ into the transponder.”

For starters, we should not find it surprising that there are uncertainties in general about what happened on the flights, especially the first two. Neither of Flight 11 or 175’s flight data recorders were recovered,¹⁰ and the cockpit voice recorder from Flight 77 was too damaged to retrieve information from.¹¹ That the Commission expresses these uncertainties in their report is therefore expected and reasonable.

Regardless, even if we accept the Report’s comments at face value, they still do not create significant problems for the idea of a successful hijacking of the airplane. As Mr. Ryan himself acknowledges, the hijackers “jamming their way in” is only speculation, and this language is imprecise enough that we do not know that it means the hijackers had to physically break the door down to gain access to the cockpit. Furthermore, the Commission states that another way they could have gained access was simply to take a cockpit key from one of the attendants, noting that “American Airline flight attendants all carried cockpit keys on their person.”¹²

- Mr. Ryan claims that “For Flight 175, the Commission report does not describe how the alleged hijackers got into the cockpit.” However, this is not exactly true. The Report notes that, given the similarities between the hijackers’ reported seating positions on Flight 175 compared to those on Flight 11, and similar eyewitness accounts from the flight, they “believe the tactics were similar on both flights.”¹³ This would, of course, involve the hijackers on Flight 175 taking a cockpit key from one of the attendants. Again, FAA regulations mandated at the time that all flight attendants carry cockpit keys on them at all times during a flight.¹⁴
- Mr. Ryan notes that the Commission provides no detailed explanation of how the hijackers entered the cockpits on Flights 77 and 93, writing “for Flight 77 and Flight 93, the alleged hijackers just appear in the cockpit and in control of the aircraft.” He further notes that the pilots on Flight 93 were given a warning four minutes before the hijackers would have entered the cockpit, meaning “the aircraft crews were given more than enough time to enter the hijack codes.” Again, if the hijackers were able to secure a key from one of the flight attendants, there is no mystery as to how they could have entered the cockpits easily. In the case of Flight 93, the Commission notes that, according to the cockpit voice recorder, the hijackers likely had a flight attendant captive with them, whom they could have taken a key from.¹⁵

To summarize, nothing Mr. Ryan cites from the Commission Report demonstrates that the hijackers successfully overtaking the aircrafts was “exceedingly improbable.” Nor has he demonstrated that my citation of the Report is in anyway invalid. Likewise, sources outside the Report fully corroborate my contention that pilots were not given proper training before 9/11 to deal with suicide hijackings, and nothing Mr. Ryan cites contradicts that.

Misrepresentations

In responding to my arguments, Mr. Ryan unfortunately seems to have misunderstood much of what I said, and thus misrepresents my arguments. For example, he claims my discussions imply

“that pilots might be willing to give up control of the aircraft without a fight.” He further quotes the IFALPA document I originally cited as stating “Control of the aircraft remained with the pilots.” However, my discussion implied no such thing. Rather, my point was that pilots were trained prior to 9/11 to abide by the hijackers’ demands, but this does not mean literally handing over the aircraft’s controls to them. One hopes Mr. Ryan understands that a hijacking does not inherently mean the hijackers themselves have to be at the controls. All that is required for a hijacking to successfully take place is for the hijackers to take the aircraft hostage and direct the pilots and crew to do what they want. That is precisely what sources predating 9/11 stated was to be expected, and again, Mr. Ryan cites nothing that contradicts this.

Furthermore, Mr. Ryan notes my “casual” reference to the Bojinka Plot, but misunderstands why I discussed it in the first place. Citing that and other pre-9/11 evidence, including a series of hijack exercises carried out by NORAD before 9/11, he asserts that “suicide hijackings were expected and were not, as Taylor suggests, a surprise to anyone.” But this is not what I suggested. I agree that such pre-9/11 information is relevant, and should be considered properly. However, the fact that such hijack exercises were carried out before 9/11 does not mean *pilots in general* were trained to deal with suicide hijackings. As the literature Mr. Ryan cites even shows, the exercises were primarily concerned with scenarios involving NORAD intercepting and possibly shooting down the hijacked aircrafts.¹⁶ Mr. Ryan cites nothing from this documentation stating the exercises involved pilots having to fend off hijackers involved in a martyrdom operation, and certainly nothing showing the pilots on the 9/11 flights had this training either.

This is the reason I referenced such information in the first place; hijacking operations like those which occurred on 9/11 were considered a very real possibility by relevant authorities, and training to deal with such events should have been provided to pilots, but was not. Nor, as I discussed, were other security measures put into place, such as improving security for cockpit doors, something that was also done only after 9/11. This is the breakdown in security before 9/11 that warrants further investigation, to determine whether this represents rank incompetence, or something more sinister and intentional. Information such as this is what I also emphasized was lacking on the IC911J site, and should be included there in order to bring more awareness of it to the public at large.

Omitted Details

In order to challenge the primary contentions of my paper, Mr. Ryan omits several relevant details that severely undermine his case that successful hijackings on 9/11 were “exceedingly improbable.” For example, one of the claims I challenged was the IC911J’s assertion that in order to fend off the hijackers, the pilots could have “[performed] a violent flight control maneuver to thwart an invasion of the cockpit.” As the IFALPA document I cited made clear, this is “the most dangerous thing that a pilot could do,” and is strongly discouraged as a means to thwart a hijacking.¹⁷ Mr. Ryan does not even try to dispute this, but instead quibbles over irrelevant details from the document, such as its description of the planes’ fuel loads and “emotionally charged” claims about the hijackers. None of this has anything to do with whether the pilots could have executed maneuvers to stop the hijackings. Since Mr. Ryan did not rebut this, it stands to reason that, at the very least, this claim should be revised or removed from the IC911J site. But as of writing this, this assertion is still on the website.

Mr. Ryan also downplays the threat the hijackers would have imposed on the pilots by pointing out that the so-called “muscle hijackers” were “not physically imposing, with all 5 and a half feet tall or less and slender in build.” He also emphasizes the physical stature and military training of

the pilots, such as Charles Burlingame, as evidence that it was “exceedingly improbable that the small, slender alleged hijackers could have physically overwhelmed all the highly trained military officers flying all the planes.” In order to draw this conclusion, however, Mr. Ryan overlooks several relevant details.

For starters, regardless of the physical stature of the hijackers, the fact remains they were all full-grown adults, nearly all in their 20’s. Furthermore, many of them are noted to have received military training at al Qaeda training camps,¹⁸ indicating they would have been more than able to handle themselves in physical combat if needed. Likewise, regardless of their impressive physical stature and training, Mr. Ryan fails to consider several factors the pilots would have dealt with on the flights during the hijackings:

- The pilots were all strapped into their seats at the time.
- They would have had their backs to the hijackers.
- They were in a confined space where movement was difficult to begin with.
- None of the pilots were armed, whereas the hijackers had knives and/or boxcutters.
- A confrontation with the hijackers could have involved as many as five against two (or four against two in the case of Flight 93).

There should be no question that any physical confrontation on any of the flights would have been quite uneven. All of these factors cumulatively contribute to the immense difficulty the pilots would have fighting off the hijackers, and simply cannot be ignored in discussions such as these.

Irrelevancies

In addition to his unsupported and fallacious claims, Mr. Ryan also peppers his response with several irrelevant points which have no bearing on the central point of my original paper.

- *Descriptions of fuel load and “emotionally charged” language.*

As we noted previously, Mr. Ryan’s only complaint against the IFALPA document I cited was its incorrect statement about the planes’ fuel loads, and its “emotionally charged” descriptions of the hijackers. This has nothing to do whatsoever with the document’s points that pilots were not provided training to deal with suicide hijackings before 9/11, and that violent flight maneuvers are strongly discouraged as a method to prevent a hijacking.

- *The hijackers were identified as security risks, linked to al Qaeda, before 9/11.*

I agree this is a relevant detail, and the failure to properly follow up on this information from relevant authorities deserves investigation. However, this does nothing to show that once the hijackers were on the flights, they could not have overtaken the aircrafts from the pilots.

- *Most of the hijackers did not know they were going to die that day.*

Mr. Ryan cites a Guardian article, discussing the fact that many of the hijackers likely did not know they were taking part in a martyrdom operation in the first place.¹⁹ However, a follow-up article in the Washington Post states this idea is inconclusive, and that many terrorism experts “believe it is likely that all the hijackers had agreed to die.”²⁰ Regardless, even if not all the hijackers believed

they were on a suicide mission, the hijacker pilots obviously did, and as long as the rest of the hijackers were able to assist in overtaking the planes, nothing more would have been needed from them.

Conclusion

In light of everything discussed here, I maintain the central argument of my original paper stands: Prior to 9/11, pilots were not provided the training needed to deal with suicide hijackings, and thus the hijackers on 9/11 could have overpowered the pilots and gained control of the aircrafts. This is supported by numerous sources outside the 9/11 Commission Report, including professional pilot organizations and airline officials. Mr. Ryan's attempt to rebut my arguments is insufficient, as shown here. He employs fallacious arguments, offers unjustified dismissals of my sources, misrepresents my original points, and omits several relevant details that support my claims. In order to properly address what I said and justify Point 1 of the IC911J's webpage, I will repeat what I said in my original paper.

In order for this point to be valid, the Center must present pre-9/11 evidence showing (1) pilots were given training to deal with suicide hijackings specifically, and (2) that violent flight maneuvers were recommended and considered safe before 9/11 to deal with hijackings. Until such evidence is presented, there is no justification I can see to keep this point, as it is, on the website.

Neither Mr. Ryan nor the IC911J has done this yet. As such, my recommendation to the IC911J also stands. I respectfully request that the Center revise their webpage to correct or possibly retract Point 1 of their "10 Reasons" page. The hijackings of the four flights on 9/11 happened, and were most certainly not "exceedingly improbable."

Special thanks to Adam Fitzgerald for providing references used here, and to Simon Falkner for his helpful comments and suggestions.

Notes

1. Adam Taylor, "Request for Revision – Comments on Point 1 Raised by the International Center for 9/11 Justice," *International Center for 9/11 Justice*, 28 July 2023, <https://ic911.org/debated-topics-forum/forum/request-for-revision-comments-on-point-1-raised-by-the-international-center-for-9-11-justice>.

2. Kevin Ryan, "Response to Adam Taylor Request for Revision of IC911.org Website," *International Center for 9/11 Justice*, 28 July 2023, <https://ic911.org/debated-topics-forum/forum/response-to-adam-taylor-request-for-revision-of-ic911-org-website>.

3. Phillip A. Karber, "Re-constructing Global Aviation in an Era of the Civil Aircraft as a Weapon of Destruction," *Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy* 25(2), March 2002: 781–814.

4. "America Under Attack: How Could It Happen?," *CNN Live Event*, 12 September 2001, <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/se/date/2001-09-12/segment/60>.

5. Lucia Mouat, "How airlines prepare flight crews for hijacks," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 20 June 1985, <https://www.csmonitor.com/1985/0620/atrain-f.html>.

6. Quoted in Gary N. Horlick, "The Public and Private International Response to Aircraft Hijacking," *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law* 6(1), Fall 1972: 144–185, <https://scholarship.law.vanderbilt.edu/vjtl/vol6/iss1/9>.

7. Ibid.

8. *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.), p. 85.

9. Kevin Ryan, "The 9/11 Commission Claims That 'We Found No Evidence,'" *Dig Within*, 30 October 2011, <https://digwithin.net/2011/10/30/no-evidence>.

10. Although it's been occasionally claimed the recorders were recovered, the sources of these claims have been shown to be uncorroborated and most likely false. See Mike Williams (webmaster), "Black Boxes," *9/11 Myths*, http://www.911myths.com/html/black_boxes.html.
11. "Specialist's Factual Report of Investigation: Digital Flight Data Recorder," *National Transportation Safety Board*, 31 January 2002. Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20121010093205/https://www.nts.gov/doclib/foia/9_11/AAL77_fdr.pdf.
12. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 5, cf. 453n26.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
14. FAA Order Number 8400.10, 7 January 1997. Cited and quoted in Andrew R. Thomas, *Aviation Insecurity: The New Challenges of Air Travel* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), pp. 33–34.
15. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 12.
16. "NORAD Exercises Hijack Summary," <https://www.scribd.com/document/16411947/NORAD-Exercises-Hijack-Summary>. Cited in Kevin Ryan, "NORAD's Coincidental Exercises on 9/11," *Dig Within*, 30 July 2017, <https://digwithin.net/2017/07/30/norad-exercises-911>.
17. "Aggressive Manoeuvring," *IFALPA*, April 2003, p. 3, <https://www.ifalpa.org/media/2034/03adobl01-aggressive-manoeuvering.pdf>.
18. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 234.
19. David Rose, "Attackers did not know they were to die," *The Guardian*, 14 October 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/14/terrorism.september111>.
20. Dan Eggen and Peter Finn, "Were All Hijackers in on Suicide Pact?," *The Washington Post*, 17 October 2001, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2001/10/17/were-all-hijackers-in-on-suicide-pact/5e43b0a5-049b-4caa-b0c6-91702479f5c2>.