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From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
Sent: Thursday, May 5, 2011 2:16 PM
To: H
Subject: FW: 9-11 and HRC

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From: Sperling, Gene [mailto:]
Sent: Thursday, May 05, 2011 2:05 PM
To: Mills, Cheryl D
Subject: 9-11 and HRC

B6

Hey how are you? Well I hope.

Listen, I participated in a 9-11 Memory project that National Journal did 9 years ago. I just saw they reprinted my section – and since it involved HRC – I wanted to make sure you saw it.

Take care,

Gene

Voices of 9/11

Voices of 9/11

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By **National Journal staff**

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Gene B. Sperling

Former economic adviser to President Clinton

I was at the Brookings Institution, preparing to go to the Hill for a 9:45 meeting with a senator in the Dirksen Senate Office Building. Near the elevator, a colleague said, "A plane ran into the World Trade tower." I thought of a small commuter plane and wondered whether a lot of people-like meaning 20 or 25-had died. My first thought was of being a kid. When I was little, we used to go to the Empire State Building, and we were always kind of fascinated with the notion of planes and that building. Then I heard somebody say, "Another plane has hit the World Trade tower." At that moment, I

instantly knew it was terrorism. But I still thought we were talking about small planes; I guess I had in my mind the plane that had tried to go into the White House one late night when I was there, a small plane. Downstairs, in the cab, was the first I heard that it was a 767.

I figured my meeting would be canceled but I ought to show up anyway. I was there a little early, and one of the senator's aides came out and said, "This is horrible. They may be getting briefings on this, so just hang here for a few minutes, but I think we'll have to reschedule."

At that moment, my cell phone went off and it was my older brother, Mike, who's an attorney in Milwaukee, and he wanted to make sure that I was in D.C., and not in New York. I hung up the phone, and the news suddenly said the Pentagon had been attacked. And at that moment, like a lot of people, I had no idea whether the White House or the Capitol or monuments or anything else might be attacked. My cell phone went off again. It was Mike again, and he said, "Get the hell out of there!" I said, "Bro', don't worry, I'm thinking just like you!"

So I went down on the street-the corner on the Union Station side-to try to find a cab. People were crowding into cabs, and hundreds of people seemed to come up. I'd only started walking, maybe 30 yards, when I heard a familiar voice yell, "Gene Sperling! Gene Sperling, get in the car!"

I looked up and I saw a silver car, and I was confused because all I could see were two large men in the front seat. And I finally saw that on the other side there was a woman yelling to me. It was Mrs. Clinton. I think they were less than thrilled that Mrs. Clinton was stopping at all; these are moments when the Secret Service has a mission to get her to a protected area. She asked me where I was going. I said Dupont Circle, but I could walk. She insisted I get in-it was right on the way.

It was a car ride I'll never forget. She was the first person I was really sharing this horrible, horrible day with. And you could see the different roles in her life. To the Secret Service, she was an ex-first lady. For herself, you could see her flipping back and forth between trying to be the best senator of a state that has just been terrorized, to a wife and a mother who's not satisfied by the 80 percent assurance that her daughter is OK and whose mind is racing, trying to figure out what close friends lived or worked near the World Trade Center.

I wanted to digest what we were hearing, but I also felt that old loyalty to be an adviser. And so her aide, Huma Abedin, and I were trying to place phone calls for Mrs. Clinton to different parts of the New York government, to the police department, to FEMA. Like everyone else, we were experiencing the frustration of the phones being jammed.

While we would be placing these calls, she would ask one more time about Chelsea. Huma kept telling her she was pretty sure Chelsea wasn't near the trade center. And Mrs. Clinton would seem satisfied for about 40 seconds, until she would spin out different scenarios: "Well, what if she came back? Or what if she went jogging?" Huma seemed to have some reason to believe that Chelsea was more midtown at that time. But, you know, telling a mother that you're 80 percent sure that her daughter is safe is not very satisfying.

One of the worst moments was when Mrs. Clinton turned to me and asked, "Gene, where does Nickie work? Where does Nickie work?" My heart just sank. Nicole Davison is a woman who interned for me at the National Economic Council, but was also Chelsea's best friend. And I felt horrible, because I knew Morgan Stanley, where she worked, had a big office in the trade center. I said, "I'm not sure." As it turned out, Nickie was in the midtown office, but I did not find out that she was OK until much, much later that day.

I was trying to be very functional, to think through different steps Mrs. Clinton might have to take-as I would have done during the eight years we were in the White House. For that 20-minute ride, I was, in a sense, one of only two aides able to help her think through, a little bit, the various actions and steps she might need to do during this completely unprecedented day. It was not that I had any special insight, but you want to try to have a level head.

For me, at that moment, I was more struck by the horror of the overall situation. There was a feeling that there were just thousands and thousands of people who were going to be dead, and that inevitably, there would be people that you knew. A couple people who crossed my mind were close friends, a judge at the 2nd Circuit, and another friend from law school, who worked for the New York legal defender. They were evacuated, but were OK. Plus, you still didn't know whether this was the end or just somewhere in the middle of this attack. There were still a lot of rumors at that point. There was a rumor that the State Department and Old Executive Office Building had been hit.

Around 11th or 12th Street we came to a light, and suddenly the guy on the radio started saying, almost like you were listening to the "War of the Worlds" tape: "Oh my God, the World Trade tower has just collapsed! Oh my God, the World Trade tower has just collapsed! Oh my God, the World Trade tower has just collapsed!" It was unimaginable. And that was the moment when the car just went silent. And I just remember staring at Mrs. Clinton and seeing just the hint of-just the slight watering of her eyes. It was unfathomable that it had collapsed. To hear a radio announcer in hysterics and try to imagine it was even more horrific than when I actually watched the second one collapse, live, on TV. We rode for a couple of blocks, I think, stunned, before conversation continued. I remember saying, "This is like Pearl Harbor." She said, "It's worse. It's worse."

I hopped out a couple of blocks past Brookings. I think we just clutched arms, and I said, "Whatever I can do, let me know." And Mrs. Clinton was just very motherly: "Take care of yourself. Be careful."

When I went back up to Brookings, I had a very eerie memory. Twenty years before, I had been at Brookings as a research assistant, and I watched the Air Florida crash on a black-and-white TV in the office. There was a camera covering it live, but they had no sound. And you literally watched the hook come down and rescue people, and then you saw a man who didn't seem to be able to get up; you saw some people fall, and the notion that you were watching some survive and some people die right in front of your eyes-it just brought back that horrible moment. It was one of the most haunting things I ever witnessed in my life at that time. In my Brookings office, I saw the second tower collapse.

I did not feel the tears until later, when they started showing the people in New York looking for their family members, and I saw this mother and two daughters looking around for their dad.

There used to be times at the White House when I would come down at night and see Sandy Berger and think to myself that as weighty as the economic issues were that we were dealing with, that, you know, how truly heavy must be the weight when the decisions you're making can have a direct impact on life and death. So I felt enormous empathy for the people in the White House that day. While I had not experienced anything like that in my eight years, I could imagine the sense of responsibility everybody there would feel, and how all-consuming this must have been.

Sperling is director of the National Economic Council in the Obama administration.

This interview originally appeared in the August 31, 2002 edition of National Journal.