



56 years before 9/11: A plane crash into Empire State Building



(Graphics: *rijo*)

There is nothing new in history: A prominent Manhattan skyscraper hit by a plane and a popular mayor of Italian origin with great political ambitions dealing with the disaster - not in 2001 but already in 1945 (quoted from Stanley Weintraub: The Last Great Victory. The End of World War II, July / August 1945. New York 1995, p. 294):

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[July 28, 1945] at 9:49 A.M. on a misty Saturday morning, the equivalent of an unguided missile struck the Empire State Building, tallest of the world, 915 feet above street level. A B-25 “Mitchell” bomber [...] lost in blinding fog as it flew west from Squantum Army Air Force Base in Massachusetts, crashed into the seventy-ninth floor and engulfed two stricken floors in fire from its fuel tanks. Sheared off by the impact, its wings fell as fiery debris while the fuselage and motors ripped a hole eighteen feet wide and twenty feet high in the brick wall, and the building swayed momentarily in a two-foot arc. One motor hurtled across the seventy-ninth floor, tore through the south wall, and fell to the roof of a twelve-story office building

on Thirty-third Street, demolishing a penthouse apartment; the other, along with part of the landing gear, crashed into an elevator shaft, plummeting down a thousand feet to the subcellar.

The pilot, Lieutenant Colonel William F. Smith, Jr., had completed thirty-four bombing missions over Germany safely, but he and two others on board perished high over Manhattan, while ten people in the building, many fewer than would have been at risk on an ordinary working day, died. One man, panicked by the flames, leaped from a window, striking a ledge on the seventy-second floor. Empty elevators dropped eighty stories. Fire trucks materialized by dozens, choking miles of streets.

Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia's car radio, always tuned to the police band, alerted him to the disaster. He rushed off, siren sounding, to Thirty-fourth Street, announced himself, and climbed to the nearest safe floor to supervise operations. It was almost like the old days, when he was Franklin Roosevelt's bumbling first Director of Civilian Defense - an appointment many took as reassurance to Americans that its cities would never be bombed.

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