Part 1: Warnings in advance

Was the US government alerted to September 11 attack?

Patrick Martin
16 January 2002

It is not necessary to postulate an all-embracing conspiracy, extending from the White House to the airline security personnel who let the armed hijackers board the planes, to believe that there is much more to the story of the September 11 attacks than the American public has been told so far. Certainly the least likely and least credible explanation of that day’s events is that the vast US national security apparatus was entirely unaware of the activities of the hijackers until the airliners slammed into the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

According to this official version, voiced most crudely by FBI Director Robert Mueller immediately after the event, no one in the US government had the slightest idea of the identities of the September 11 hijackers, the methods they would employ, or the targets they would choose. A careful review of the information that has come to light, in bits and pieces, since September 11, demonstrates that these claims are not merely tenuous, but clearly, obviously and knowingly false.

The case of Zacarias Moussaoui ["The strange case of Zacarias Moussaoui: FBI refused to investigate man charged in September 11 attacks"] is only the most glaring evidence that the September 11 terrorist attacks represent, not merely a colossal failure on the part of the FBI and CIA, but a refusal to act that has no legitimate explanation. Not only were there general warnings of the likelihood of suicide hijackings, but several of the hijackers, including the man alleged to be the principal organizer, Mohammed Atta, were under active surveillance by US agents. It is not too much to say that the terrorists were only able to accomplish their murderous and destructive mission because US intelligence agencies ignored repeated warnings, refused to carry out elementary defensive actions and manifested a seeming indifference to the prospect of a major terrorist attack on American soil.

Added to that is the refusal of any branch of the US government to conduct any probe into the circumstances of an attack which killed more Americans than the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear bombings combined, and which came about only combined to foretell the scale of the attack and its main target, but indicated that hijacked commercial aircraft would be the weapon of choice.

According to an article in one of the major daily newspapers in Germany, published just after the destruction of the World Trade Center, the German intelligence service BND told both US and Israeli intelligence agencies in June that Middle East terrorists were “planning to hijack commercial aircraft to use as weapons to attack important symbols of American and Israeli culture.”

The newspaper cited unnamed German intelligence sources, who said that the information came through Echelon, the US-controlled system of 120 satellites which monitors all worldwide electronic communications. Echelon is operated jointly by the United States, Canada, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, although its existence is not officially admitted. (Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, September 14, 2001)

The government of Egypt sent an urgent warning to the US June 13, based on a video made by Osama bin Laden. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak told the French newspaper Le Figaro that the warning was originally delivered just before the G-8 summit in Genoa. It was taken seriously enough that antiaircraft batteries were stationed around Christopher Columbus Airport in the Italian city. According to Mubarak, bin Laden “spoke of assassinating President Bush and other heads of state in Genoa. It was a question of an airplane stuffed with explosives. These precautions then had been taken.” (Source: New York Times, September 26, 2001, “2 Leaders Tell of Plot to Kill Bush in Genoa,” by David Sanger)

According to Russian press reports, Russian intelligence notified the CIA during the summer that 25 terrorist pilots had been specifically training for suicide missions. In an interview September 15 with MSNBC, Russian President Vladimir Putin confirmed that he had ordered Russian intelligence in August to warn the US government “in the strongest possible terms” of imminent attacks on airports and government buildings. (Source: From The Wilderness web site: MSNBC)

The London-based Sunday Telegraph—an arch-conservative newspaper usually highly supportive of the Bush administration—reported that the Israeli intelligence service Mossad had delivered a warning to the FBI and CIA in August that as many as 200 followers of Osama bin Laden were slipping into the country to prepare “a major assault on the United States.” The advisory spoke of a “large-scale target” in which Americans would be “very vulnerable.” The Los Angeles Times cited unnamed US officials confirming this Mossad warning had been received. (Source: Sunday Telegraph, September 16, 2001, “Israeli security issued urgent warning to CIA of large-scale terror attacks,” by David Wastell and Philip Jacobson; Los Angeles Times, September 20, 2001, “Officials Told of ‘Major Assault’ Plans,” by Richard A. Serrano and John-Thor Dahlburg)
The Independent, a liberal daily in Great Britain, published an
article asserting the US government “was warned repeatedly that a devastating
attack on the United States was on its way.” The Independent cited an
interview given by Osama bin Laden to a London-based Arabic-language
newspaper, al-Quds al-Arabi, in late August. About the same time, tighter
security measures were ordered at the World Trade Center, for
did not heed several warnings of attack,” by Andrew Gumbel)

Despite this series of alerts, no US intelligence agency issued any
warning of a possible attack on a target on US territory in the months
leading up to September 11. The CIA and FBI had issued warnings about
likely attacks on American military bases or embassies in the Middle East,
Europe and Asia. On September 7 the US Department of State issued a
worldwide alert about an impending attack by bin Laden followers,
although it was focused on US-related targets in east Asia, especially
Japan, not within the US itself. As the ranking Republican on the Senate
Intelligence Committee, Senator Richard Shelby, admitted, “This
obviously was a failure of great dimension. We had no specific warning of
the US being attacked.”

Moreover, the FBI’s decision to take no action on Zacarias Moussaoui
must be considered in the light of this continuous stream of warnings from
overseas. The US government was being repeatedly alerted to the danger
of devastating attacks using hijacked commercial aircraft, yet the FBI
decided to conduct no serious investigation into a man, believed by
French intelligence to be linked to Osama bin Laden, who wanted to learn
how to steer a 747 jumbo jet, but not to take off or land. Moussaoui was
not even turned over to the FBI by the Immigration and Naturalization
Service until after September 11.

US investigations and concerns

Despite claims that US intelligence agencies had not considered the
possibility of suicide attacks involving commercial airliners before
September 11, there were many indications of such concerns on the part of
the American government over a period of eight years.

An expert panel commissioned by the Pentagon in 1993 discussed how
an airplane could be used to bomb national landmarks. “It was considered
radical thinking, a little too scary for the times,” said retired Air Force
Col. Doug Menarchik, who organized the $150,000 study for the Defense
Department’s Office of Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict.
“After I left, it met a quiet death.” The decision not to publish detailed
scenarios was made partly out of a fear that it could give terrorists ideas,
participants said. A draft was circulated through the Pentagon, the Justice
Department and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, but senior
Different Hit, Chemical, Germ Agents Focus of Preparations,” by Jo
Warrick and Joe Stephens)

Three incidents of attempted attacks on buildings using airplanes took
place during 1994. The first, in April of that year, involved a Federal
Express flight engineer who was facing dismissal. He hoarded a DC-10 as
a passenger and invaded the cockpit, planning to crash the plane into a
company building in Memphis, but was overpowered by the crew. The
second came that September, when a lone pilot crashed a stolen single-
engine Cessna into a tree on the White House grounds just short of the
president’s bedroom. The third was the December hijacking of an Air
France flight in Algiers by the Armed Islamic Group. The hijackers had
the plane land in Marseilles and ordered it loaded with 27 tons of fuel,
three times the amount required to reach Paris. Their aim was to crash it
into the Eiffel Tower. French special forces stormed the plane on the
Offered Signals That Were Missed,” by Matthew Wald)

In January 1995, Philippine police arrested and tortured Abdul Hakim
Murad in a Manila apartment where bomb-making equipment was found.
He told them of plans to plant timed explosive devices on 11 US airliners
simultaneously, and to crash-land an airplane into CIA headquarters in
Langley, Virginia. The preparations were so far advanced that Murad
detailed the specific flights targeted, most of them trans-Pacific flights
which would explode over the ocean. Murad had attended flying schools
in the United States, served as a commercial pilot’s license, and told
investigators he was to fly the plane into CIA headquarters. Another
Islamic fundamentalist was to fly a second plane into the Pentagon.
(Source: Washington Post, September 23, “Borderless Network of Terror,
Bin Laden Followers Reach Across Globe,” by Doug Struck, Howard
Schneider, Karl Vick and Peter Baker)

Later that year, the alleged organizer of the first World Trade Center
bombing, Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, was captured in Pakistan, turned over to
US agents and flown back to the United States for trial. On the flight,
Yousef reportedly boasted to FBI agent Brian Parr and the other agents
guarding him that he had narrowly missed several opportunities to blow
up a dozen airliners on a single day over the Pacific and to carry out a
kamikaze-type suicide attack on CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia.
Yousef was referring to the same plot for which Abdul Hakim Murad had
been arrested in the Philippines. Murad was extradited to the United
States, where his testimony played a major role in Yousef’s trial and
247)

Early in 1996, US officials had identified crop-dusters and suicide
flights as potential terrorist weapons, and began taking elaborate steps to
prevent an attack from the air during the Summer Olympic Games in
Atlanta. Black Hawk helicopters and US Customs Service jets were
deployed to intercept suspicious aircraft in the skies over the Olympic
venues. Agents monitored crop-duster flights within hundreds of miles of
downtown Atlanta. Law enforcement agents also fanned out to regional
airports throughout northern Georgia “to make sure nobody hijacked a
small aircraft and tried to attack one of the venues,” said Woody Johnson,
the FBI agent in charge of the Atlanta office at the time. From July 6
through the end of the Games on August 11, the FAA banned all aviation
within a one-mile radius of the Olympic Village that housed the athletes.
It also ordered aircraft to stay at least three miles away from other sites
beginning three hours before each event until three hours after each event
ended. (Source: Los Angeles Times, November 17, 2001, “Suicide Flights
and Crop Dusters Considered Threats at 96 Olympics,” by Mark
Fineman and Judy Pasternak)

As early as 1996 the FBI began investigating the activities of Arab
students at US flight schools. Government officials admitted that “law
enforcement officials were aware that fewer than a dozen people with
links to bin Laden had attended US flight schools.” FBI agents visited two
flight schools in 1996 to get information about several Arab pilots who
received training there. The two schools were among those attended by
Abdul Hakim Murad, who had told Philippine and US police about plans
to fly a hijacked plane into CIA headquarters. In 1998 FBI agents
questioned officials from Airman Flight School in Norman, Oklahoma
about a graduate identified in court testimony as a pilot for Osama bin
Laden. This was the school later attended by Zacarias Moussaoui. A
Washington Post article concludes: “Since 1996, the FBI had been
developing evidence that international terrorists were using US flight
schools to learn to fly jumbo jets. A foiled plot in Manila to blow up U.S.
airliners and later court testimony by an associate of bin Laden had
touched off FBI inquiries at several schools, officials say.” (Source:
In the run-up to the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, there was active consideration of the danger of “a fully loaded, fuelled airliner crashing into the opening ceremony before a worldwide television audience,” according to former Sydney police superintendent Paul McKinnon. Osama bin Laden was considered the number one threat, he said. IOC officials said plane-crash catastrophes have been incorporated into security planning for every Olympics since 1972. “That was our nightmare scenario,” one IOC official said. There were extensive IOC discussions with the FBI during 2001 in the course of the security planning for the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. (Source: Sydney Morning Herald, September 20, 2001, “Jet crash on stadium was Olympics nightmare,” by Jacquelin Magnay)

The 2000 edition of the Federal Aviation Administration’s annual report on Criminal Acts Against Aviation, published early in 2001, said that although bin Laden “is not known to have attacked civil aviation, he has both the motivation and the wherewithal to do so,” adding, “Bin Laden’s anti-Western and anti-American attitudes make him and his followers a significant threat to civil aviation, particularly to US civil aviation.” (Source: FAA)

Beginning in early 2001 a trial was held in New York City of four defendants charged with involvement in the 1998 bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The trial revealed that two bin Laden operatives had received pilot training in Texas and Oklahoma and another had been asked to take lessons. L’Houssaine Kherchtou, a bin Laden associate turned government witness, told the court how he was asked to take flying lessons in 1993. Another bin Laden aide, Essam al-Ridi, testified that he had bought a military aircraft for bin Laden and flown it to Sudan. Al-Ridi became a government witness in 1998, giving the FBI inside information about a pilot-training scheme three years before the September 11 attack. While the proceedings of the trial extended from February to July 2001, they did not produce any heightened alert in relation to US commercial aviation. (Source: Court transcript available at www.cryptome.org)