

Part 4: The refusal to investigate

Was the US government alerted to September 11 attack?

Patrick Martin
24 January 2002

[Part one](#) | [Part two](#) | [Part three](#) | [Part four](#)

This series has reviewed evidence that US intelligence agencies had ample advance information about the September 11 attacks, from specific details of the methods and the likely targets to the identities of a number of the hijackers, including the alleged principal organizer, Mohammed Atta. There are other troubling and unresolved issues, such as the failure to scramble air defense fighters in time to intercept any of the jetliners.

From a political standpoint, however, there is a piece of evidence which outweighs all others in suggesting that the real story of September 11 has yet to be told: the refusal of the Bush administration and Congress to conduct any investigation into the terrorist attacks and the government response to them.

More than four months after the largest single act of mass murder ever to take place on US soil, there have been no congressional hearings, no investigating commission has been announced, and calls for such a panel have been largely ignored. Even internal FBI investigations have been shelved. This inaction is extraordinary and has no legitimate political explanation. It stinks of political cover-up.

Republicans block bipartisan commission

The initial response in Congress to September 11 was to move toward the formation of an independent commission, with members appointed by the congressional leadership and the White House, to review the events leading up to the attack, including the obvious failure of US intelligence agencies to forestall or prevent the suicide hijackings. The House Intelligence Committee included such a proposal in its draft of the appropriations bill for US intelligence operations. Then the White House stepped in.

On October 6, the House of Representatives voted to approve the intelligence budget, with a huge increase in spending, while backing off from calls for an investigation into the unpreparedness revealed on September 11. The Republican House leadership moved to limit the commission's authority, putting forward an amendment to strip the commission of subpoena powers and the right to grant immunity to witnesses, and shifting its focus to an examination of "structural impediments" to the collection and analysis of intelligence information. In other words, instead of an investigation into the failure of the CIA and FBI to prevent September 11, the commission's mandate would be to propose broad new powers for the spy agencies.

The congressional Republicans were clearly carrying out the wishes of the Bush administration. Democrats declined to push for a roll-call vote

on the issue, allowing the Republican plan to pass on a voice vote. The *New York Times* wrote: "There is little appetite in Washington now for a postmortem on the government's failure to detect and defeat the plot."

Two weeks later, Republican Senator John McCain and Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman declared in a television appearance on "Meet the Press" that they supported the establishment of an independent commission to investigate the September 11 attack. Lieberman cited, among other examples, the precedent of the special commission which investigated military preparedness after Pearl Harbor. The Democrat said he expected the Bush administration to support such a proposal.

But on November 21, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee and his Republican counterpart, Robert Graham of Florida and Richard Shelby of Alabama, said that they would forego any investigation into the failure to predict or prevent the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks until sometime in 2002. House leaders also agreed to wait until the new year. Graham said it would not be appropriate to conduct such a probe during the war in Afghanistan, and Shelby described an investigation as a diversion. Both senators said they had been in contact with the White House, which agreed with their decision to put off any hearings.

During the same period the FBI moved to put an end to any serious criminal investigation into the suicide hijackings. The *New York Times* reported October 8: "The Justice Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation have ordered agents across the country to curtail their investigation of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks so they can pursue leads that might prevent a second, possibly imminent, round of attacks, senior law enforcement officials said."

Shortly thereafter two senior FBI officials decided to retire. Neil J. Gallagher announced he would leave his position as head of the national security division. Thomas J. Pickard, the day-to-day chief of the investigation into the September 11 attacks, told the agency October 31 that he would also quit. Both retirements took effect November 30.

Pickard had handled many previous terrorism investigations for the FBI and was only 50 years old. His abrupt departure under wartime conditions is therefore all the more extraordinary. Under other circumstances the media might have denounced this as tantamount to desertion of duty, or conversely praised his ouster as an example of the FBI cleaning house after a disastrous failure. Instead, the retirement of the man principally responsible for the investigation into September 11 drew almost no media attention.

The Pearl Harbor precedent

The refusal to conduct an investigation into September 11 has been variously justified on the grounds that such a probe would be inappropriate in wartime or that it would become an exercise in partisan finger-pointing.

As the experience of the Clinton administration showed, there is hardly any reluctance in today's Washington to engage in scapegoating and the use of investigations to fight out political differences. One can only imagine what the response of congressional Republicans would have been had September 11 occurred in 2000 instead of 2001. But as *New York Times* columnist R.W. Apple observed December 14, "so far surprisingly few people inside government or out have been willing to accuse the agencies of falling down on the job. And there has been no chorus of voices calling for the head of George J. Tenet, the director of central intelligence."

As for the argument that wartime precludes a major investigation, the Pearl Harbor precedent completely refutes it. Within a month of the attack, Roosevelt appointed a commission headed by Supreme Court Justice Owen Roberts to investigate the conduct of military officers at Pearl Harbor. The commission took testimony, issued its findings and had the two commanding officers at Pearl Harbor censured, ending their careers, without the slightest detriment to the US war effort.

If it was possible for the US government to conduct an investigation while engaged in an unprecedented military mobilization against two powerful adversaries, imperial Japan and Nazi Germany, why is it impossible today, when the supposed enemy is a small band of terrorists based in the poorest country in the world?

The White House and its apologists made heavy use of the precedent of World War II to justify Bush's issuance of an executive order to try alleged terrorists before secret military tribunals, citing the case in which Roosevelt approved a military tribunal to deal with eight captured German saboteurs. But they ignore the example of World War II when it comes to an investigation into the supposed "sneak attack" of September 11.

(The example of the Roosevelt's tribunals is perhaps inadvertently revealing, however, since he ordered the closed-door trial not because of military necessity in wartime, but because top intelligence and military officials faced political embarrassment. Two of the eight saboteurs turned themselves in to the authorities after they arrived in the US, but the FBI initially refused to believe their account, terming their first telephone contact a "crank call." FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover wanted to conceal this negligence, while the War Department wanted to keep quiet about the ease with which the eight had been landed in Florida and Long Island by German U-boats—a fact obvious to the Nazi high command, but unknown to the American public.)

A new push for an investigation

On December 20, two months after their initial comments, McCain and Lieberman unveiled legislation to establish a bipartisan 14-member commission of inquiry modeled on the Warren Commission or the Pearl Harbor investigation. Four members would be selected by Bush, and ten more by congressional leaders of both parties. McCain suggested former senators Gary Hart and Warren Rudman as possible co-chairmen, since they chaired a previous commission which predicted in 1999 that in a future terrorist attack "Americans will likely die on American soil, possibly in large numbers."

McCain said that he and Lieberman had gone public with their plan because "there is resistance inside all of these agencies to an independent investigation."

Explaining why a joint investigation involving both the executive and

legislative branches was necessary, McCain said, "Neither the administration nor Congress is capable of conducting a thorough, nonpartisan, independent inquiry into what happened on September 11."

Anne Womack, a White House spokeswoman, gave a noncommittal response to the proposals, repeating the Bush administration's excuse for inaction. "We look forward to reviewing them," she said. "Right now, the president is focused on fighting the war on terrorism."

The *New York Times*, in reporting the new calls for an independent investigation, said that "for Democrats, a senior Congressional aide said, the government's confused response to the anthrax sent in letters to Senators Tom Daschle, Democrat of South Dakota, and Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, had hit home in the Senate and prompted more interest in a thorough examination of the government, including its apparent lack of plans to fight bioterrorism."

We are entitled to interpret this Aesopian language in the light of what we know about the anthrax attacks, which involved highly potent spores obtained from a secret US Army germ warfare program. The anthrax attacks were an attempt to destroy the congressional Democratic leadership. This is recognized by some of the Democrats, and likely McCain as well, impelling them to make this very tentative and cautious rejoinder.

It would be foolish to place any confidence in such half-hearted steps. The history of Democratic Party responses to state provocations and attacks on democratic rights shows a steady downward curve over the past quarter century: from the limited exposures of Watergate and the Church commission into CIA and FBI crimes in 1973-1976, to the failure to break through Reagan administration stonewalling over the Iran-Contra affair in 1987, to prostration in the face of the right-wing campaign to destabilize the Clinton administration, which culminated in impeachment.

Provocation and war

The information summarized in this series represents only facts made public in the US and international media. The public does not have access to the far more voluminous data, based on electronic intercepts, secret surveillance and other sources, which was available to the entire American intelligence apparatus during the period leading up to September 11. But even this limited selection demonstrates the falsity of US claims that the World Trade Center was an unforeseeable surprise attack.

In examining any crime, a central question must be "who benefits?" The principal beneficiaries of the destruction of the World Trade Center are in the United States: the Bush administration, the Pentagon, the CIA and FBI, the weapons industry, the oil industry. It is reasonable to ask whether those who have profited to such an extent from this tragedy contributed to bringing it about.

Those who believe it is inconceivable that the US government could carry out such an action would be well advised to learn from history. In nearly every war since the United States first emerged as a world power a century ago, the ruling class has seized on events or atrocities of a similar kind to overcome the instinctive reluctance of the American people to become involved in overseas conflicts.

In some instances the *casus belli* was wholly fabricated, as in the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident which led to passage of a congressional resolution authorizing massive US intervention in Vietnam. Or the pretext may have been an accident—the explosion that destroyed the battleship *Maine* in Havana harbor in 1898, which set the stage for the Spanish-American War. But in the majority of cases the event chosen to trigger war was subject to a degree of manipulation behind the scenes by the US government.

The sinking of the Lusitania in 1915 was the foreseeable result of the Wilson administration's decision to allow passenger liners to carry arms shipments for the British-French side in World War I. When a German submarine torpedoed the ship, with the loss of 1,200 lives, the resulting public outrage helped fuel US entry into the war. Pearl Harbor likewise was foreseen by the Roosevelt administration—if not the specific date and location, certainly the likelihood of a preemptive Japanese attack—once the US cut off all shipments of oil and scrap metal to Japan in the summer of 1941.

A cruder case of manipulation is the August 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, which became the occasion for the large-scale—and seemingly permanent—deployment of American troops and warplanes in the Persian Gulf and Arabian peninsula.

Throughout the 1980s, Saddam Hussein was a de facto military ally of the United States, receiving US intelligence information and US-approved weapons shipments to aid his war against Iran. After Iran was compelled to accept a cease-fire in 1988 largely favorable to Iraq, the main US (and Saudi) concern was to prevent Baghdad, with its battle-tested million-man army, from dominating the Persian Gulf.

A series of conflicts ensued, largely provoked by Kuwait. The oil-rich emirate demanded immediate repayment of billions in war loans to Iraq, while at the same time draining oil from the Rumaila field, which lies largely on the Iraqi side of the border, thus putting Iraq in a severe financial squeeze. In retaliation, Saddam Hussein engaged in saber-rattling declarations, describing Kuwait as the lost nineteenth province of Iraq, stolen from the country by British imperialism.

The US response to this conflict was notably reserved. In her now-famous meeting with Saddam Hussein the month before the Iraqi invasion, US Ambassador April Glaspie declared that Iraq's dispute with Kuwait was a matter for those two to resolve for themselves, with no role for the United States. Meanwhile, on the orders of Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Norman Schwarzkopf drew up plans for a massive US military intervention in the Persian Gulf aimed against Iraq. War-gaming of this plan was completed in July 1990, within days of the Glaspie-Hussein meeting.

There is ample reason to believe that the US tacitly encouraged an Iraqi attack so as to provide a pretext for smashing the Iraqi military and realizing a long-desired goal of US foreign policy, the establishment of a dominant American military position in the oil-rich Persian Gulf. In the same way, the Bush administration has used the World Trade Center catastrophe as the opportunity for deploying American military forces in Central Asia and the Caspian basin, a region of vast untapped oil reserves which is expected to become the Persian Gulf of the twenty-first century.

US officials were quoted after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait to the effect that they had not thought that Saddam Hussein would seize the whole country. In other words, they encouraged his appetites, expecting only a border conflict which would bring the US in as an arbiter and thus strengthen its role in the Gulf region. A similar miscalculation may have been involved in the September 11 hijackings, whose consequences were far more devastating than might have been expected.

It is not possible to determine, based on the facts currently available, the exact degree of advance knowledge the American government possessed about the World Trade Center catastrophe. But the question deserves the most thorough investigation.

Alternative explanations—that the FBI and CIA were guilty of ineptitude so spectacular that it amounts to criminal negligence—do not place the US government in a much better light. The American people are being asked to give their blind trust for an unlimited and open-ended campaign of military action by a government which either permitted, or proved incapable of preventing, the slaughter of thousands of its own citizens.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact