

ABC News' "Missed Opportunities" evades central questions of government role in September 11 attacks

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On February 18-20, the ABC News evening program World News Tonight broadcast a three-part series titled "Missed Opportunities," which purported to explain the lapses in US intelligence that opened the way for the September 11 terror attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

The airing of the series was undoubtedly a response to growing concern in the US population over the lack of any investigation into the colossal breakdown in security that attended the disaster. After nearly six months, there has been no accounting by the Bush administration or any government agency for what took place, and Congressional hearings into the attacks have yet to get under way.

The ABC News report, however, was a study in superficiality and evasion, suggesting an effort at damage control rather than serious investigative reporting. Dubbed an "in-depth investigation," the series was deficient in details and provided only the most cursory account of the events leading up to September 11. Each segment lasted about two minutes—considered "exhaustive" by today's network news standards—but hardly sufficient to probe such a critical and complex issue.

Even more significant, those facts that were adduced were used to bolster the series' main contention, which was summed up in the report's title: "Missed Opportunities." The report began by baldly asserting: "The terrorist attacks of September 11, the worst in US history, came as a complete surprise to US law enforcement and intelligence agencies."

Everything that followed this introduction—including details about US intelligence agencies' knowledge of the hijackers and their activities, and numerous warnings to government officials of an imminent terrorist attack—was skewed to support the program's main theory that the intelligence breakdown was the product of mistakes, which, at worst, rose to the level of official negligence.

Patrick Martin's series Was the US government alerted to

September 11 attack?, published on the *World Socialist Web Site* in January in four parts, outlined in detail the many facts that have come to light in the months since the terror attacks which fly in the face of the claim that the events of September 11 took the government by surprise. He wrote: "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."

Each of the three parts of the World News Tonight series provided certain details of advance warnings of a terrorist attack, explained how the FBI and CIA failed to act on these warnings, and concluded that this breakdown in security was the result of mere oversights and errors. But despite the conclusions of the "Missed Opportunities" report, the information presented in the series contradicts a theory that says the US government was blameless in the events.

The February 18 segment, titled "Early Warnings: Pre-September 11 Cautions Went Unheeded," noted that Marvin Cetron, an author and speaker on terrorism, warned in a report to the Pentagon that the US was extremely susceptible to a domestic attack. He told ABC News, "We saw Osama bin Laden. We spelled it out and we said the United States was very vulnerable. You could make a left turn at the Washington Monument and take out the White House. And you could make a right turn and take out the Pentagon." Cetron said he was told to remove the warning from his report by Pentagon officials, who told him, "We don't want it released because you can't handle a crisis before it becomes a crisis, and no one is going to believe it anyhow."

This installment also reported that shortly before September 11, the US National Security Agency intercepted "multiple phone calls from Abu Zubaida, bin Laden's chief of operations, to the United States." These intercepts were reportedly never passed on to other intelligence agencies or the Bush administration.

“Warning Signs: Government Missed Trail of Messages Before the Attacks,” the second segment of the series aired February 19, recounted the case of Sayyid Nosair, an Egyptian-American living in Brooklyn, who was arrested in 1992 for the 1990 assassination of Zionist extremist Meir Kahane. During their investigation into Nosair’s case, the FBI seized “bomb-making instructions, pictures of New York City landmarks, including the World Trade Center, and pages of handwritten Arabic.” Prosecutors attached little significance to this evidence, and the material was never translated until after the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

The segment also recounted the case of Ramzi Yousef, who was convicted of terrorism charges in the 1993 bombing. ABC News reported, “Investigators later learned Yousef intended to hijack a plane and fly it into CIA headquarters or a nuclear power plant. At the time, the FBI thought the idea was farfetched.”

The report related as well what was described as “another possible missed opportunity,” which came in 1996. That year, at the urging of the United States, Sudan expelled Saudi exile Osama bin Laden, and also allowed the US to photograph suspected terrorist training camps in the country. ABC News said that the Sudanese government then sent a message via American businessman Mansoor Ijaz indicating it was willing to share information on bin Laden’s Al Qaeda network. Tim Carney, the former US ambassador to Sudan, told ABC News, “It was an offer US officials did not take seriously.”

According to the report, the US also received intelligence a month before September 11 that Ayman Al-Zawahiri, a key associate of bin Laden, was receiving medical treatment at a clinic in Yemen. Sources told ABC that the Bush administration “rejected a plan to capture him as officials could not be 100 percent sure the patient was Al-Zawahiri.”

The final segment, “US Targets Overlooked,” broadcast February 20, began by noting that “in the weeks before September 11, both the FBI and the CIA were almost certain an attack by Osama bin Laden was coming.” According to the report, however, the intelligence agencies made the mistake of anticipating that such an attack would take place overseas.

This argument was exposed by the information presented in the segment, which cited numerous indications that an attack was being prepared on US soil. On August 21, the FBI put the names of two Al Qaeda suspects on a border-watch list—and soon thereafter learned that they were already in the country. These two men—Kahlil Almihdhar and Nawaf Alhamzi—were to become two of the nineteen hijackers on September 11.

In the WSWs series, Patrick Martin asked: “How was it possible for two men being sought by the FBI and CIA, with

alleged ties to the man the US government had branded the most dangerous terrorist in world, to buy expensive first-class one-way tickets for an airline flight, then board and hijack a jetliner on September 11?” “Missed Opportunities” left that question unanswered.

The ABC News report also noted that in early August the FBI office in Phoenix alerted FBI headquarters about an unusual influx of Arab students at local flight schools. This warning was also ignored.

“Missed Opportunities” then referred to the case of Zacarias Moussaoui. The series explained how on August 15 the FBI received a call from a flight instructor in Minneapolis reporting on a foreign student who “wanted to pay cash to learn to fly a Boeing 747.” ABC News reported, “Moussaoui was taken into custody on August 16, but to the outrage of FBI agents in the field, headquarters was slow to react and said he could not be connected to any known terror group.”

ABC News quoted former FBI agent Bill Gavin on the Moussaoui case: “If you look and you have a person with a bad passport who’s trying to learn how to fly a big aircraft—flying bombs, as it were—you have to really think about [whether he is] a loner. The bell goes off. Could there be somebody else trying to do this, too?”

“Missed Opportunities” provided no explanation for why US intelligence agencies failed to act on crucial data, such as that in the Moussaoui case. The ABC News investigation turned up what is referred to in the series as “a trail of missed signals, missed opportunities, and warnings ignored.” But there can be no innocent explanation for the refusal on the part of US intelligence to carry out basic defensive actions in the face of mounting evidence of an imminent terrorist attack in the US.

It is impossible to determine, outside of a thorough investigation, the extent of advance knowledge the American government had about the planning and execution of the September 11 terror attacks. What is clear from what is known so far, however, points to a conscious decision at high levels of the US government to impede measures—in some cases, measures demanded by lower-level agents—that would have headed off the attack.

By painting the US authorities as naïve—guilty merely of “missed opportunities”—the ABC News series served to further the official cover-up of the tragic and unexplained events of September 11.



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