

Furor over visas for 911 hijackers

Bush sacks immigration officials: Who is accountable, and who is not

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Letters from the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), reporting visa approvals for two of the September 11 hijackers, arrived at a Florida flight school on March 11, six months after the destruction of the World Trade Center. The visas were for Mohammed Atta and Marwan Al-Shehhi, believed to be on board the two airliners that crashed into the twin towers in New York City.

The letters became a media sensation for several days. Bush was asked about them at his March 13 press conference and pronounced himself “really hot” about this seeming example of bureaucratic inertia. The next day, four top officials of the INS were removed from their positions, as the Bush administration announced a drastic shakeup of the agency.

INS Commissioner James W. Ziglar, a Bush appointee, declared, “The breakdown in communication, highlighted by this week’s events, at INS is unacceptable and will not be allowed. These changes begin the process of accountability as we move forward with restructuring the INS.” Neither Ziglar nor the other top political appointee, Stuart Anderson, director of policy and plans, will be affected.

The four officials removed or reassigned include the executive associate commissioner for field operations (the number three man in the agency and the senior career official), the director for international affairs, the assistant deputy executive associate commissioner for immigration services, and the assistant commissioner for inspections.

At the same time, in a letter to the House Appropriations subcommittee responsible for overseeing the INS, Attorney General John Ashcroft asked for new legislation empowering him to remove any INS official. Ashcroft wrote: “[I]t is essential that I have the authority to quickly discipline or terminate individuals for acts of

negligence, mismanagement or disregard for Department of Justice policies.”

The official explanation of the letters was that Atta and Al-Shehhi had applied for student visas in the summer of 2000, when they enrolled at Huffman Aviation in Delray Beach, Florida. These visas were approved in July and August 2001—more than 12 months after the initial application, but before the suicide hijackings—and the INS sent letters to Atta and Al-Shehhi notifying them.

The confirmation letters to the school, however, were delayed another seven or eight months, arriving long after the September 11 hijackings. An investigation is now under way to determine whether the responsibility for this second long delay lies with the INS or the private company that is the subcontractor for issuing the documents.

The furor in the media and in political circles, both the Bush administration and the Democrats and Republicans in Congress, involves a great deal of posturing, but little in the way of a serious examination of the implications of the INS snafu. The press accounts and pronouncements of political leaders leave untouched the most important issues raised by the incident.

Most striking is the contrast between the swift reaction to apparent INS incompetence and the failure of the Bush administration or Congress to conduct any investigation into a far bigger case of negligence (or something worse): the failure of the intelligence and military apparatus to foresee or prevent the terrorist attacks of September 11.

Heads are rolling in the INS over an embarrassment: the delivery of letters approving visas for men long dead and now notorious. But no one has been held responsible at the CIA, the FBI or the Pentagon for the biggest breach of security in US history, which cost the lives of more than 3,000 people. Where is the “process of accountability”

which the Bush administration claims to uphold?

The criminal investigation into September 11 has been essentially shut down. Whatever internal inquiries were conducted by the Bush administration have not been made public and no officials have been removed or even reprimanded. Not one congressional hearing has been held into the events that caused the greatest civilian casualties of any act of violence in US history.

The reason for this disparity is not hard to discern. The INS officials transferred or demoted last week are minor functionaries who can easily be scapegoated. Those responsible for the security breach that led to September 11 stand at the highest levels of the national security apparatus, close to the levers of governmental power.

The official cover-up of the circumstances surrounding the September 11 attacks has continued, even in the course of the denunciations of the INS. Both the Bush administration and the media have distorted the background to the granting of a student visa to Mohammed Atta, the man alleged to have been the ringleader of the hijackers.

An official statement declared, “When the applications were approved, the INS had no information indicating that Atta or Al-Shehhi had ties to terrorist organizations.” The *Washington Post* reported this denial uncritically, writing that “officials had no knowledge that the two men were connected to terrorist groups at the time.”

In fact, Mohammed Atta had been under FBI surveillance as a suspected terrorist during the previous year. According to television reports in Germany, Atta was being followed by the FBI for several months in 2000 as he made purchases of chemicals which could be used in terrorist attacks.

Despite this, he was allowed to reenter the United States early in 2001—although a routine Customs inquiry revealed a discrepancy in his visa status, since he identified himself as a student at the south Florida flight school, but was traveling on a tourist visa. Over the next six months, the INS processed Atta’s application, approved it and issued him a student visa.

The FBI surveillance of Atta has never been mentioned in the American press, despite the well-documented reports in Germany. This is a central part of the whitewash of the role of the CIA, FBI and other intelligence agencies in the period leading up to September 11. Whether these agencies were guilty of colossal negligence, or complicit in permitting the attacks to go forward, there is ample evidence that they were informed of the preparations for the hijackings.

Another issue raised by this incident is the high-handed and anti-democratic basis on which hundreds of immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia have been rounded up and imprisoned in the post-September 11 dragnet carried out by the Bush administration. Most of the more than 1,000 people detained were sent to prison, not for any criminal charge, but because of technical violations in their visa status.

Now the INS admits that it is guilty of protracted delays in approving visas and notifying applicants. If one accepts the official version, that the visas for Atta and Al-Shehri were treated in typical fashion, then it is evident that hundreds of thousands of immigrants encounter such bureaucratic obstacles to their right to travel, study or work.

It is not uncommon for immigrants to file in a timely fashion for an extension or alteration of their status, only to wait months on end for the INS to respond. In some cases, immigrants are left in a legal limbo when their paperwork gets buried in the INS backlog and the protracted delay results in their current status lapsing.

How many of those arrested and jailed since September 11 were “guilty” of just such visa infractions? In many cases—including one of the best known, that of Rabih Haddad, the Moslem cleric from Ann Arbor, Michigan—delays in INS processing contributed to or caused the violations that authorities used as a legal pretext for arrest and indefinite detention.

As a result of deficiencies in paperwork, hundreds have been held for months, while the Justice Department refuses to divulge their identities, severely restricts their contact with family members, and spies on their conversations with attorneys.



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