Further delay in US congressional investigation into September 11 attacks

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Congressional hearings into the September 11 terrorist attacks and the failure of US intelligence agencies to prevent them will not be held until late April or early May, the Democratic co-chairman of the inquiry said Monday. This pushes back the opening of the hearings, once scheduled for early April, then mid-April, by a further two to three weeks.

Senator Bob Graham of Florida, who chairs the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, told the *New York Times* that the joint House-Senate panel was still hiring staff and identifying documents for review and witnesses to call.

The investigation is to involve special joint hearings of the House and Senate intelligence committees. Some sessions are to be held in public and others behind closed doors. The House committee is headed by Republican Porter Goss, a former CIA case officer.

Graham said the hearings would focus on two issues: reviewing the performance of US intelligence agencies before September 11, going back as far as 1985, and considering what changes might be required in intelligence operations to prevent future attacks.

Congressional hearings on September 11 have been repeatedly delayed, both by outright opposition from the Bush administration and the intelligence agencies, and by the reluctance of either Democrats or Republicans to open up an inquiry so fraught with explosive political consequences.

Graham and Goss rebuffed calls for an inquiry in the weeks immediately following September 11, siding with White House suggestions that congressional hearings into the greatest security failure in US history would detract from the efforts to prevent future terrorist attacks and conduct the war in Afghanistan.

Only in mid-December, after more than three months had passed without any steps towards an investigation, were resolutions introduced in the Senate to establish an independent bipartisan commission into September 11. The proposed commission was to be modeled on the Warren Commission, which conducted the official probe of the Kennedy assassination, and the investigation held after Pearl Harbor, which was chaired by Associate Supreme Court Justice Owen Roberts.

The Bush administration decided that an investigation by the House and Senate intelligence committees—whose members work closely with the CIA and Pentagon—would be more narrowly focused and more easily controlled than either an independent commission or a Watergate-style special congressional committee.

But as late as January 29, Vice President Dick Cheney called Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle seeking to forestall any investigation at all. According to Daschle, Cheney said cooperating with an investigation would divert resources from the “war on terrorism.” Daschle refused this request, but agreed to confine the inquiry to hearings by the intelligence committees, in what the Democratic leader called an effort to “limit the scope and the overall review of what happened.”

The special joint House-Senate investigation was announced last month, after the White House finally agreed to cooperate. Graham and Goss, accompanied by their respective ranking minority members, Democratic Representative Nancy Pelosi and Republican Senator Richard Shelby, worked out the details of the probe in meetings with Vice President Cheney and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice.

Graham and Goss then formally unveiled the inquiry at a press conference February 14. In the clearest sign of the rigged character of the investigation, they announced the selection of L. Britt Snider as staff director. Snider retired last year as inspector general of the CIA, a position to which he was appointed by CIA Director George Tenet, whose performance would necessarily be a principal subject of any serious and impartial investigation.

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This announcement—roughly equivalent to putting a top aide to Jeffrey Skilling or Kenneth Lay in charge of the Enron investigation—staggered even some of the journalists who have swallowed one lie after another from the White House about the "war on terrorism." One reporter asked whether Snider's appointment didn't set the stage for a "whitewash." Graham, Goss and Shelby all defended Snider, with Shelby declaring he is "not going to be associated with any whitewash."

But statements made by the co-chairmen of the inquiry made it clear that the purpose of the hearings would be to carry out an official cover-up of the US intelligence establishment.

Senator Graham declared the inquiry would not play "the blame game about what went wrong from an intelligence perspective," but would concern itself with measures to strengthen US spy agencies for the future. Congressman Goss added, "This is not a who-shall-we-hang type of investigation. It is about where are the gaps in America's defense and what do we do about it type of investigation."

In other words, the joint House-Senate probe—if it ever does actually get under way—will start from the premise that US intelligence agencies have no culpability in the events of September 11. This premise is entirely unfounded, and is contradicted by a large body of evidence that has emerged in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Many of the circumstances of September 11 point, at the minimum, to gross negligence on the part of the intelligence establishment, and, more likely, a deliberate decision on the part of high-level intelligence and government operatives to block elementary security measures and allow the terrorist plot to go forward. Some of the unanswered questions include:

* The longstanding ties between the CIA and Osama bin Laden, who was active in the US-backed Afghan guerrilla war against the Soviet occupation in the 1980s.

* A series of warnings, from 1995 on, about possible suicide hijackings of commercial airliners, including specific alerts during the summer of 2001 from the intelligence services of Israel, Russia, Egypt and Germany.

* The opposition in FBI headquarters to investigating Zaccarias Moussaoui, the Islamic fundamentalist detained in August after he sought training in how to fly—but not take off or land—a Boeing 747.

* Reports that alleged ringleader Mohammed Atta was under FBI surveillance as a terrorist suspect in 2000, but was allowed to enter and leave the US repeatedly in the period leading up to the hijack-bombings.

* The case of two men subsequently named as hijackers who were on a CIA watch list and were being sought by the FBI and INS, but nonetheless were able to pay cash for first-class, one-way airline tickets at Dulles Airport outside Washington DC and board the jetliner that eventually crashed into the Pentagon.

There is mounting evidence that the Bush administration's own internal investigation into September 11 is a crude cover-up. The FBI itself wound up any criminal inquiry barely a month after the destruction of the World Trade Center. Since September 11, despite thousands of arrests among immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia, the federal government has not arrested a single person besides Moussaoui—in custody since mid-August—on charges of assisting or participating in the hijacking conspiracy, and the official responsible for the investigation has since retired.

At the same time, according to a report February 23 in the *New York Times*, the National Transportation Safety Board has not released any of the technical or factual information normally provided after air disasters, because the FBI has taken jurisdiction over the probe. The information withheld includes transcripts of the cockpit voice recorders from the planes which hit the Pentagon and crashed in Pennsylvania, the flight data recorder from the Pennsylvania plane, the tapes of conversations between the pilots and air traffic control, analysis of radar data, and even the airline passenger lists from the four flights.

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