Cover-up and conspiracy: The Bush administration and September 11

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The Bush administration has been plunged into a major political crisis following press reports that Bush was briefed on the danger of a terrorist attack involving the hijacking of US airliners more than a month before September 11. Despite the warning, delivered in an intelligence briefing last August, the White House took no action to forestall the deadliest terrorist action in US history, or to warn the public.

The revelations of the past 48 hours show, at the very least, that the Bush administration has been concealing information for the past eight months about the circumstances leading up to the terrorist attacks which killed 3,000 people in New York City and Washington.

In the days after September 11, Bush administration officials repeatedly characterized the suicide hijackings as a sneak attack for which there had been "no warning." These statements are now exposed as lies—a fact that inevitably raises the question of why the White House sought to conceal the nature of the warnings it had received.

The cover-up began to come apart last week, with the report on CBS News Wednesday night that Bush had received a CIA briefing on August 6, five weeks before the attack on the World Trade Center, which suggested that an airplane hijacking by terrorists linked to Osama bin Laden was an imminent possibility. This prompted an explosion of reporting and commentary in the media Thursday and Friday, and demands for a full-scale congressional inquiry from House and Senate Democratic leaders, as well as sections of the Republican Party.

Congressional critics took particular note of the coincidence of the August 6 briefing and two FBI reports, one from the Phoenix, Arizona office July 10, the other from Minneapolis August 13, which focused attention on suspicions that Al Qaeda operatives were using US flight schools to gain expertise required to hijack airplanes. The July 10 memo urged a nationwide screening of flight schools and cited possible links to Osama bin Laden. The Minneapolis FBI agents reported the detention of Zaccarias Moussaoui, the French-Moroccan immigrant who wanted to learn how to fly a Boeing 747, but not take off or land. One email from a Minneapolis FBI agent described Moussaoui as someone who might fly a jumbo jet into the World Trade Center. Both reports were ignored by FBI headquarters.

Several senators, Republicans as well as Democrats, said the revelations about advance warnings raised the issue of whether the September 11 attacks could have prevented, saving thousands of lives. Senator John McCain, Arizona Republican and former candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, said, "There were two separate FBI reports plus a CIA warning, none of which were coordinated. The question is, if all three had been connected, would that have led to more vigorous activity?"

McCain said that he and Senator Joseph Lieberman, the Democratic vice presidential candidate in 2000, would push for legislation to create an independent bipartisan commission to investigate what the government knew and did in the period leading up to September 11. The Bush administration has vociferously opposed such an investigation, claiming that it would disrupt the ongoing war in Afghanistan and the next stage of the "war on terrorism."

Lies and bullying

The Bush administration's response to the latest revelations is consistent with its posture ever since September 11, a combination of lies and bullying. The lies came from National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, press spokesman Ari Fleischer, and other White House aides. The bullying came from Republicans in Congress—who characteristically accused Bush's critics of virtual treason—and especially from Vice President Richard Cheney.

At a fundraising dinner in New York City, Cheney made an extraordinary warning to "my Democratic friends in Congress." Cheney said, "They need to be very cautious not to seek political advantage by making incendiary suggestions, as were made by some today, that the White House had advance information that would have prevented the tragic attacks of 9/11." He called such criticism "thoroughly irresponsible ... in time of war."

Cheney also demanded a gag rule for any congressional investigation into September 11. "It must protect sensitive sources and methods, yet must be devoid of leaks, and it must avoid sensational and outrageous commentary," he said. Reiterating the White House line that any serious probe of the events surrounding the September 11 attacks would be tantamount to giving "aid and comfort" to the enemy, he went on to declare, "Perhaps most important, an investigation must not interfere with the ongoing efforts to prevent the next attack, because, without a doubt, a very real threat of another perhaps more devastating attack still exists."

The official line from the White House is that it will cooperate with a joint House-Senate intelligence committee probe that is slated to begin holding hearings next month. But press reports have cited complaints from Congress that the administration is refusing to fully cooperate, and to date the White House has rejected calls for it to turn over the text of the August 6 CIA briefing paper, as well as the memos from the FBI offices in Phoenix and Minneapolis.

The attempts by White House aides to defend Bush's performance have only made matters worse. Contradiction has been piled upon contradiction, raising the inevitable question: what is the administration trying to hide?

Bush himself did not help matters when he appeared before a group of congressional Republicans and declared that if he had been aware of the plans of the hijackers, he would have used the "full force and fury of the United States military to stop it." For all the bombast, Bush did not attempt to explain why, given the warning of a possible hijacking, nothing was done to mobilize air defense jets in the period after August 6. No US-based fighter jets were on alert September 11, according to the Air Force,

and those which did respond to the hijackings did not reach New York City and Washington until after the hijacked jets had hit their targets.

At her press conference Thursday, Condoleezza Rice was visibly fumbling in her explanation of the August 6 briefing and the overall record of the Bush administration in the period leading up to September 11. The national security adviser said the danger reported was a hijacking to take hostages, not turn the plane into a suicide weapon. She said, "I don't think anybody could have predicted that these people would take an airplane and slam it into the World Trade Center, take another one and slam it into the Pentagon, that they would try to use an airplane as a missile."

This claim is simply not credible, on a number of levels. The FBI office in Minneapolis, for one, warned precisely of such an attack. Moreover, there is a considerable history, now stretching back a half dozen years, of efforts by terrorists linked to Al Qaeda plotting to hijack airplanes to use as suicide weapons. One such hijacking took place in France in 1994, and a similar effort was broken up by Philippine police in 1995, with the organizer turned over to the US for interrogation.

There is the example of the G-8 conference at Genoa, which took place July 20-22, 2001. After warnings from a number of sources, including Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, a close US ally, that a hijacked airplane filled with explosives might be crashed into the conference building, the Italian authorities deployed anti-aircraft guns around the site and banned local flights.

Throughout the summit, Bush spent his nights on a US navy warship in the harbor, because of security concerns. Yet Rice claims that two weeks later, when the President's daily briefing contained a warning that Al Qaeda was targeting US airplanes for hijacking, no one considered the possibility that the planes could be used as flying bombs.

Rice's claim does not square with the overall record of the Al Qaeda organization. As one analyst, Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution, told the *Boston Globe*, "'The idea that Al Qaeda was going to use a routine hijacking tactic, as the White House has argued, never made sense. It's an organization that sought to kill large numbers of people dating back a decade.... Anybody who thought that Al Qaeda might hijack a plane should have immediately deduced that they would try to kill anyone on board, which means that the classic tactic of dealing with hijacking should have been recognized as inapplicable.'"

Even if one accepts the White House assertion that it could not have imagined a hijack-bombing, the fact that it admits having been alerted to the danger of a hijacking of any kind raises questions with damning implications. If the Bush administration had taken any serious measures to prevent a typical hijacking, those measures would also have stopped the suicide bombers.

But despite the warning delivered August 6, there was no increased security on the part of the airlines. The 19 hijackers boarded planes without hindrance on September 11, many of them paying cash for first-class, one-way tickets. This, despite the fact that several of the hijackers were under federal surveillance or being sought by the FBI, including Mohammed Atta, the alleged ringleader, and Hani Hanjour, believed to be the pilot of one of the hijacked jets.

Rice claimed that the warning of a possible hijacking had been very general, and based on only a single report, from British intelligence, dating back to 1998. But as one Democrat, ranking House Intelligence Committee member Nancy Pelosi, observed, "The questions are: What were the changed circumstances on August 7 [sic] that prompted the intelligence community to bring to the direct attention of the president information from three old reports on possible terrorist activity? And after raising the issue to such a high level, what actions, if any, were considered appropriate in light of this information?"

Mere "incompetence" cannot explain September 11

The media and some Democrats and Republicans in Congress have begun to raise questions about the conduct of the administration, and particularly US intelligence agencies, in the months leading up to the September 11 attacks. This is a marked shift after eight months of uncritical support for the "war on terrorism" and servile praise for Bush personally.

The sudden barrage of public criticism remains confined within narrow limits, however. There are charges that US intelligence agencies and the Bush administration responded with slowness, incompetence or outright indifference to clear threats of terrorist attacks on American targets. But there has been no questioning of Bush's overall policy of military intervention in Central Asia, the Middle East and elsewhere. And none of Bush's official or media critics has raised the most fundamental issue: that the inaction before September 11 was deliberate, that the US government welcomed the impending terrorist attack as a convenient pretext for the launching of a long-planned campaign of American military aggression.

From this standpoint, the most important of the week's revelations was the report by NBC News that Bush had on his desk September 9—two days before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—a National Security Presidential Directive outlining in detail a worldwide campaign of military, diplomatic and intelligence action targeting Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organization, including the delivery of an ultimatum to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, backed by the threat of war.

The draft order, according to NBC, "outlined essentially the same war plan that the White House, the CIA and the Pentagon put into action after the September 11 attacks." It was prepared through a process of consultation over many months, involving the Pentagon, CIA, State Department and other security and intelligence agencies. In other words, well before the terrorist hijackings, the Bush administration was preparing to launch the military action that it later claimed was taken only in response to the September 11 atrocity.

There is a basic contradiction in the account given by the Bush administration. Rice and other spokesmen have presented a picture of a government increasingly focused on the imminent threat of a major terrorist attack within the United States. Moreover, as the NBC report underscores, the administration was preparing to launch a military attack against Al Qaeda and its alleged state supporters, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, an action certain to provoke retaliatory strikes. Yet nothing was actually done to strengthen the defenses of American cities, civil aviation, public buildings, or obvious targets like the World Trade Center—already hit in 1993 by Islamic fundamentalist terrorists.

The extraordinary revelations about the FBI's handling of the reports from Minnesota and Arizona do not permit an innocent explanation. The top level of the FBI vetoed appeals for action that even then would have seemed routine. Far more plausible than the strained attempts to explain this as a "failure to connect the dots," is the likelihood that a decision had been made, at high levels within the American state, to allow an Al Qaeda hijacking to take place, in order to provide the occasion for unleashing the military onslaught that was already in advanced stages of planning.

If there is any truth in Rice's claims that "we never imagined" hijackers using commercial jets as missiles, it may be this: those at the highest levels of the state who ordered a security "stand down" to provide a casus belli may not have anticipated that the hijacking would end with the destruction of a New York skyscraper.

Anyone who considers it unthinkable that a US government would condone the slaughter of its own citizens underestimates both the ruthlessness of American imperialism and criminality of the Bush administration. It would not be the first time a bourgeois government,

bedeviled by contradictions and crisis at home and abroad, sought to extricate itself by creating a pretext for military action, hoping to grab resources and strategic advantage overseas and whip up a patriotic consensus domestically. Certainly the Bush administration was a government in crisis by the summer of 2001, having lost control of the Senate to the Democrats and confronting the collapse of the stock market bubble, soaring unemployment, a looming fiscal crisis, and growing international opposition to its ham-fisted, unilateralist foreign policy.

Every war waged by the United States over the past century has been accompanied by provocations orchestrated by the US government to stampede public opinion and give a "defensive" cover to military aggression. The pattern is well-established, from the campaign over the explosion of the battleship *Maine*, which ushered in the US war against Spain in 1898, to the Gulf of Tonkin incident (Vietnam) and the Racak massacre, the pretext for US intervention in Kosovo in 1999.

Fraud and provocation, moreover, are second nature to the Bush administration. It was, after all, installed in office through such means, in the theft of the 2000 presidential election and the anti-democratic intervention of the right-wing majority on the US Supreme Court. Bush owes his political rise to outright gangster elements in corporate America, such as Enron. Internal Enron documents have now confirmed that former Enron chairman, Kenneth Lay, the biggest financial backer of Bush's political career, created a near-catastrophic electricity shortage in California, potentially threatening the lives of thousands, in order to boost his company's profits.

The deepening political crisis may well produce even more startling revelations. The *Washington Post* reported Friday, almost in passing, that at some point during the summer of 2001, the Bush administration decided that for security reasons Attorney General John Ashcroft should no longer travel on commercial airline flights—a far cry from the claim that the warning of imminent terrorist hijackings was "general" and "unspecific."

But no one can rely either on the American media or the Democratic politicians in Congress to conduct a serious investigation into the September 11 tragedy. Already the leading organs of the American press, such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, have published editorials declaring the reports of Bush's advance knowledge of September 11 to be "overblown" (the *Post*) or an example of a typical Washington "blame game" (the *Times*).

The *World Socialist Web Site* has been at the forefront of the critical analysis and exposure of the September 11 attacks, warning that the Bush administration and the media were deliberately concealing from the American people the real circumstances of the terrorist action and the imperialist objectives of the US war in Afghanistan. More than four months ago, we published a four-part series entitled, "Was the US government alerted to September 11 attack?"

This analysis is now being vindicated.