

New evidence that US government suppressed September 11 warnings

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A detailed letter from a top FBI official in Minneapolis, sent last Wednesday (May 22) to FBI headquarters and to the US Senate, has provided major new evidence that high-level government officials deliberately turned a blind eye to advance warnings of the September 11 terrorist attacks. The letter, portions of which have been leaked to the media, has set off a new round of public criticism of the Bush administration in both the media and official Washington.

Colleen Rowley, general counsel with the FBI's Minneapolis field office and a 20-year bureau official, wrote the 13-page memo and hand-delivered it to both FBI Director Robert Mueller and the staff of the Senate Intelligence Committee, as well as to two of the committee's members, Republican Richard Shelby of Alabama and Democrat Diane Feinstein of California. The letter reportedly named specific individuals in FBI headquarters who served to "blockade" the investigation into Zacarias Moussaoui, now charged as a co-conspirator in the September 11 suicide hijackings that killed more than 3,000 people.

Moussaoui is the Islamic fundamentalist who was detained last August 13 after he sought training in flying a Boeing 747 at a Minneapolis-area flight school. He paid \$8,000 cash for the training, but was interested only in steering a jumbo jet in flight, not in learning how to take off or land. Flight instructors at the school contacted the authorities, and Moussaoui was detained for a violation of his immigration status, while the local Minneapolis FBI office sought authorization from Washington for a wider probe.

As Rowley detailed in her letter, officials at FBI headquarters rebuffed several urgent requests from the Minneapolis office, claiming there was not sufficient evidence that Moussaoui was connected to a foreign terrorist organization. They maintained this stance even after French intelligence sources reported August 27 that Moussaoui had connections to an Islamic fundamentalist killed in Chechnya as part of a force recruited by Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda organization.

An official at FBI headquarters actually changed the text of the formal request filed by the Minneapolis office for authorization to begin an investigation into Moussaoui under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA). The effect of the alteration was to make it less likely to win approval from the secret court that handles such applications, Rowley charged.

The Minneapolis office became so frustrated by this high-level opposition to an investigation, according to one press account, "that agents there joked that Osama bin Laden must have infiltrated FBI headquarters."

In an effort to get around the roadblocks, Minneapolis agents called the FBI's legal attaché in Paris to try to follow up on the French report, bypassing headquarters, and twice contacted the

counterterrorism branch of the CIA. The second contact brought the only aggressive response from Washington—an official reprimand from FBI headquarters to the agent who called the CIA, for violating bureau procedures.

All indications are that the cover-up continues: FBI Director Mueller's first response to the Rowley letter was to order it classified top secret, thus restricting press access. He then referred her charges to the FBI's inspector general for an in-house investigation. Rowley has sought protection of her job and position under a "whistle blower" law that protects federal employees who reveal official misconduct.

As more and more information has come to light about advance warnings of the September 11 attacks from the FBI's Minneapolis and Phoenix, Arizona field offices, one comment repeated endlessly in Washington and by the media is that "no one connected the dots." This phrase has become a mantra, suggesting that what was involved was a failure of imagination, nothing more.

Rowley's letter discredits such apologetics. Her testimony reveals, not a failure to draw the proper conclusion from fragmentary evidence, but a willful refusal to investigate and a deliberate suppression of information.

According to one report, Rowley wrote: "In all of their conversations and correspondence, headquarters personnel never disclosed to the Minneapolis agents that the Phoenix Division had only three weeks earlier warned of al Qaeda operatives in flight schools seeking flight training for terrorist purposes." With that information in hand, she argued, it would have been possible to obtain a search warrant for Moussaoui's computer.

Press accounts sparked by Rowley's letter have revealed that both the report of Moussaoui's arrest August 13 and the July 10 memorandum from Arizona FBI agent Kenneth Williams, urging a systematic review of Middle Eastern students at US flight schools, were sent to the same official at FBI headquarters in Washington, David Frasca, supervisor of the Radical Fundamentalist Unit.

Thus Frasca was in possession of a memo suggesting that Islamic fundamentalists linked to Al Qaeda were seeking training at US flight schools, and a report that one such fundamentalist had been taken into US custody after he sought training to fly a Boeing 747, but not to take off or land. It is impossible to believe that any sentient individual—let alone a highly trained FBI counter-terrorism specialist—would fail to make the connection between the two.

Last Friday (May 24) three senior members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Chairman Patrick Leahy, a Vermont Democrat, and two Republicans, Charles Grassley of Iowa and Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, sent a letter to FBI Director Mueller asking him to explain Frasca's role in the pre-September 11 investigation. In

particular, they wanted to know “what connection, if any, he or others drew between the two ongoing investigations; and whether he or others brought such a connection to the attention of higher level FBI officials.”

FBI officials initially confirmed media reports that Frasca had received the Arizona memo and the information about Moussaoui from Minnesota. Later, as the implications of this became clear, the bureau backtracked, suggesting that the Arizona memo had been addressed to Frasca but that he had not actually read it before September 11.

Rowley’s letter directly rebuts the claim—voiced by FBI Director Mueller and other Bush administration officials—that critics of the administration’s handling of September 11 are engaged in “second-guessing,” and that even if the inquiries from the Minneapolis and Arizona FBI offices had been properly handled, they came too late to save the lives of the 3,000 innocent people killed in the terrorist attacks.

Rowley accused Mueller himself of deliberately distorting the pre-September 11 investigation in order to protect the FBI from embarrassment, writing, “Certain facts have been omitted, downplayed, glossed over, or mischaracterized.” The combination of the Moussaoui arrest and the Arizona memo’s focus on flight schools was more than sufficient to lead to action that could have prevented September 11, she declared.

Additional information on the Arizona investigation into flight schools confirms this analysis. The memorandum written by FBI agent Kenneth Williams, far from representing a prescient hunch, as Vice President Cheney suggested last week, was the outcome of a seven-year-long counter-terrorism investigation that had frequently focused on Islamic fundamentalists attending Phoenix-area flight schools.

According to an account published in the *Los Angeles Times* May 25, a retired special agent from the Phoenix office, James H. Hauswirth, sent a two-page letter to FBI Director Mueller in December 2001, charging that “micromanaging, constant indecision and stonewalling” had blocked a series of efforts which could have prevented the September 11 attack.

In 1994 the Phoenix office’s counter-terrorism unit was investigating an informant who had been recruited as a suicide bomber by elements linked to Al Qaeda, even videotaping him being taken into the desert to practice setting off bombs. In 1996 Kenneth Williams began to take an interest in local flight schools after an informant’s tip. Among those who was then enrolled at a Phoenix-area school—but not, apparently, under surveillance—was Hani Hanjour, said by US officials to have been the pilot of the plane that struck the Pentagon September 11.

In 1998 the Phoenix unit was investigating a flight school student from the Middle East suspected of ties to terrorist groups. Early in 2000 the same agents were monitoring students at several flight schools, including Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Prescott, Arizona. Williams was summarizing all this experience when he produced his memo, which remains classified and secret.

Williams urged his FBI superiors to order a systematic canvass of all US flight schools for students from the Middle East. This was rejected, not because it would represent racial profiling, but because FBI headquarters claimed it was impracticable and too much of a burden on bureau resources. In fact, a list of these flight schools can be obtained easily on the Internet.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, several Middle Eastern men,

including at least one who knew Hani Hanjour, were enrolled at Sawyer School of Aviation at Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix at the time that Williams’ memo arrived at FBI headquarters in Washington. In other words, if Williams’ advice had been taken, a routine canvass taking only a few hours or days would have led directly to one of the alleged September 11 hijackers.

The details of Rowley’s letter are of critical importance and have begun to be widely reported. She is expected to be among the first witnesses called by the joint congressional committee investigating the September 11 attacks, whose first hearing is to be held June 4, in secret session.

It is important to note the one central distortion in all the accounts about the conflict between FBI headquarters and the Minneapolis and Arizona branch offices of the FBI. The failure to act on the July 10 and August 13 reports is invariably attributed to incompetence, indifference, bureaucratic inertia, lack of foresight, etc. Nowhere is there any suggestion that at the highest levels of the US government, the decision had been taken to go slow on operations against Al Qaeda, as a matter of state policy.

Especially noteworthy are the sudden expressions of outrage by congressional Republicans. Senator Richard Shelby of Alabama, for example, declared, “The information coming from Phoenix and the information coming from Minneapolis was stifled here at FBI headquarters.” Senator Grassley of Iowa denounced “sabotage” by mid-level officials at the FBI. “This was worse than dropping the ball,” he said. “This was bureaucrats at headquarters actively interfering with an investigation that had a terrorist in hand.”

This is a transparent effort to divert attention from the White House to its lower-level minions in the FBI. Far more plausible than the tortuous accounts of miscalculation and missed signals is another explanation: the vast US military-intelligence apparatus was carrying out its orders. The Bush administration wanted and needed a terrorist attack as the pretext for carrying out its plans for widespread US military action, beginning in Afghanistan and extending throughout Central Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere.

It is quite possible that the US government did not foresee the precise consequences, in terms of the colossal scale of the damage and loss of life inflicted on September 11. But there can be little doubt that a deliberate decision had been made to look the other way while the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were prepared.



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