

September 11 hearings begin: Bush, Congress seek whitewash of government role

The Editorial Board
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A joint session of the House and Senate Intelligence committees began taking testimony behind closed doors June 4 on the performance of US intelligence agencies in the period leading up to the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

These hearings are a travesty of democracy: they are being held largely behind closed doors, with the evidence, testimony and even the findings to be kept secret. Those in charge of the probe, both Democrats and Republicans, have long opposed any serious investigation into the unanswered questions about September 11 that continue to pile up. Instead, they hope to use the hearings to rubber-stamp measures that will greatly expand the police and spying powers of the FBI and CIA.

Congress stalled the initiation of hearings for months, in part because of opposition from the White House, the Pentagon, the CIA and FBI, which resisted turning over documents or providing witnesses to testify, in part because the Democrats and Republicans in Congress feared—for good reason—that a serious investigation would explode the official pretense that September 11 took the US government completely by surprise.

The long delay is itself an indication that a massive political cover-up is under way. It has taken longer to convene an official congressional hearing on September 11 than it did to clean up the millions of tons of rubble from the destruction of the World Trade Center.

The Bush administration only shifted its position and began cooperating with the probe after deciding that the congressional committees, which have longstanding and close relations to the intelligence agencies, would be easy to monitor and control. The White House has consistently opposed the appointment of a bipartisan commission modeled on the Warren Commission that investigated the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, feeling that such a probe might pose greater political risks.

Bush intervened Tuesday, in advance of the first session of the hearings, to inject a note of intimidation and issue implicit warnings against any serious probe of the government's role in the events of last September. He denounced proposals for an independent commission in comments during a visit to the National Security Agency, the top-secret communications interception branch of the intelligence establishment. He flatly denied that the US government could have prevented the terrorist attacks that killed more than 3,000 people, and warned that too broad an investigation into September 11 would be disruptive.

"I'm concerned about distractions," he said. "I want the Congress to investigate, but I want a committee to investigate, not multiple committees to investigate. Because I don't want to tie up our team when we're trying to fight this war on terror. So I don't want our people to be distracted." He suggested that investigation by any panel except the intelligence committees might "jeopardize our intelligence-gathering capacity."

However, the evidence that has come to light in recent weeks suggests that the CIA and FBI failed to prevent September 11, not because they had insufficient information, but because high-level officials in both agencies intervened to protect the suicide hijackers. The congressional hearings began amid a flood of reports demonstrating that US intelligence agencies had considerable advance warning and inside information about the September 11 attacks. Among the major revelations of the past week:

Newsweek magazine reported that the CIA had identified two of the future suicide hijackers, Nawaf Alhazmi and Khalid Almihdhar, as early as January 2000. The agency linked the two Saudi men to Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, and learned that they had entered the United States, but did not issue an alert seeking their arrest or questioning for 18 months.

The *Washington Post* reported June 4, citing CIA sources, that the FBI also knew the identities of Alhazmi and Almihdhar from January 2000, despite bureau claims that it only learned of them from a CIA bulletin in August 2001.

USA Today reported June 4 that the 350,000 pages of documents turned over by the CIA to the congressional intelligence committees include memos describing Al Qaeda's intention to launch attacks in the United States; reports discussing the possibility of suicide attacks with airplanes and possible attacks on the Pentagon, World Trade Center and other targets; and electronic intercepts as late as September 10 of Al Qaeda members discussing the upcoming attack. The newspaper also reported that US operatives had infiltrated both Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak told the *New York Times*, in an interview made public June 4, that Egyptian intelligence agents had penetrated Al Qaeda and learned of unspecified plans for a major terrorist attack in the United States, information they passed on to US officials the week before September 11.

The case of Alhazmi and Almihdhar raises fundamental issues about the nature of the September 11 conspiracy. US intelligence agencies knew the two men had entered the United States after an

Al Qaeda conference in Malaysia, and permitted them to conduct activity undisturbed for the next 18 months.

They rented apartments, set up bank accounts, obtained credit cards and driver's licenses, took flying lessons, all using their real names. Alhazmi was even listed in the San Diego phone book. During this 18-month period, Alhazmi and Almihdhar met at least six of the future September 11 hijackers, including Mohammed Atta, the alleged ringleader, and Hani Hanjour, the alleged pilot of the plane that struck the Pentagon. Almihdhar left the US to travel in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, renewed his visa after it had expired, and returned to the US unchallenged, on July 4, 2001.

The conduct of Alhazmi and Almihdhar during this period strongly suggests that they were being protected. Why else would supposed members of a terrorist organization pledged to the destruction of the US government act in such a carefree fashion? They made no effort to conceal their whereabouts. They did not behave as though they feared police surveillance, exposure or apprehension.

In the media reporting of these revelations, and in the reactions of congressional Democrats and Republicans, September 11 is presented as a colossal failure of the intelligence apparatus. But the cascade of new information has shattered the alibis and evasions of official Washington. It is not a matter of terrorists "slipping through the cracks," or intelligence agencies "failing to connect the dots." There is growing reason to believe that at least some of the September 11 hijackers had ties to American intelligence agencies. They were not overlooked. They were shielded.

No such issues will be raised before the joint congressional investigation into September 11. Both the personnel of the committee and the procedures it has adopted demonstrate that both parties in Congress, together with the White House, seek to protect the power and authority of the CIA, FBI and other intelligence agencies.

Most of the committee staff was hand-picked by its first staff director, L. Britt Snider, the former CIA inspector general and a longtime crony of CIA Director George Tenet. Snider was forced out under murky circumstances last month, but the new director is equally reliable from the standpoint of the national security apparatus: Eleanor Hill, former chief counsel to the Pentagon under Clinton's Secretary of Defense William Cohen.

The Republican co-chairman of the committee, Porter Goss, is a Florida congressman who was himself a CIA spy. He worked for two years in Army intelligence, then served 10 years as a CIA clandestine services officer before retiring because of illness, whereupon he began his political career. One of his early political sponsors was the then-governor, Democrat Bob Graham, who appointed him to a local political office. Graham, now a US senator, chairs the Senate Intelligence Committee and co-chairs the joint committee.

According to Goss's congressional web site, he has "professional experience and a longstanding interest in Central America" as well as Haiti. During the years that Goss was a CIA operative, 1962-1971, these countries were ruled by brutal US-backed dictatorships, including the notorious Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua and Francois Duvalier in Haiti.

The committee's twice-weekly hearings will be held for the

most part behind closed doors, in a locked, soundproofed room, except when selected top officials, such as FBI Director Robert Mueller and CIA Director George Tenet, are called to testify. The huge number of documents turned over by the CIA and FBI remain classified, and even much of the committee's final report is expected to be kept secret.

This process—secret testimony, secret evidence, secret findings—makes a mockery of democratic principles, but it is business as usual for the spy agencies. Next week the House and Senate take up the spending authorization bill for intelligence activities. According to the rules of the House of Representatives, members will vote on the budget without being allowed to see it or know its contents. Only members of the Intelligence Committee, who have been cleared by the CIA and FBI, will be informed of what they are voting on.

Much of the press and many leading congressmen know that the congressional investigation is a fraud, an effort to cover up the behind-the-scenes involvement of US intelligence agencies in September 11. Their refusal to expose this, whether out of fear of retaliation or out of loyalty to the state apparatus, makes them complicit in criminal actions by the American government against its own citizens.

Despite the demolishing of one set of official lies after another, the American press draws no conclusions about the credibility of the White House, CIA and FBI, and obediently parrots the latest falsehoods put out by the Bush administration to replace those which have been discredited. The media reports utter absurdities with a straight face: that FBI agents do not have access to e-mail, or are barred from going on the Internet, or are routinely frustrated in their investigations because of excessive delicacy about infringing on democratic rights.

A report in the *New York Times* technology section June 3 serves to refute all such fictions. The article cites the annual wiretap report issued by the Administrative Office of the United States Courts, noting that in 2001, every single one of the 1,491 applications by federal police agencies to wiretap phones was granted. Since 1991, of the 12,661 requests for wiretapping submitted to the courts, all but three were authorized. So much for the claims that the Zaccarias Moussaoui investigation was suppressed because of fears of opposition from the special federal court dealing with intelligence spying—whose criteria are even less restrictive than those of the regular courts.

No confidence can be placed in either the congressional investigation, the proposed bipartisan commission, or the corporate-controlled media to conduct a serious investigation into the September 11 tragedy or to oppose the sweeping attacks on democratic rights which the Bush administration has carried out, citing the terrorist attack as justification. Such an exposure can only come about through the independent political mobilization of the working class, in the United States and internationally.



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