

One year after the terror attacks: still no official investigation into September 11

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One year after the September 11 terrorist attacks that killed more than 3,000 people, there has not been a single public congressional hearing, no official report has been prepared, and many of the most basic facts remain shrouded in secrecy.

Despite its public show of sympathy for the victims and their families, the Bush administration is denying them what is their most basic right: a thorough investigation into the causes of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the circumstances in which they took place.

It is now twelve months since the worst terrorist attack in history—one that was carried out without any interference from the US national security apparatus, the largest in the world. Yet not a single person has been held accountable.

As a *New York Times* article published on the anniversary noted, this failure to investigate is unprecedented for a disaster of such scope. A public probe into the sinking of the Titanic, the newspaper noted, began the morning after the survivors arrived in New York City. The Warren Commission felt compelled to report its findings on the Kennedy assassination by the first anniversary of the president's murder. Similar investigations were conducted into the US military failure at Pearl Harbor in 1941, the explosion that destroyed the Challenger space shuttle, and other disasters.

Referring to official investigations by the US Congress and other agencies into the Titanic tragedy, the *Times* wrote: "No inquiry remotely similar in scope, energy or transparency has examined the attacks of last Sept. 11.... One year later, the public knows less about the circumstances of 2,801 deaths at the foot of Manhattan in broad daylight than people in 1912 knew within weeks about the Titanic, which sank in the middle of the ocean in the dead of night."

Airline crashes are routinely investigated with great thoroughness, and the results released to the public. When an explosion destroyed TWA Flight 800 after takeoff from New York in 1996, bits and pieces of the aircraft were painstakingly assembled in a huge hangar on Long Island, and pored over by forensic scientists and Boeing engineers until the cause of the explosion—the ignition of vapors in the center fuel tank, rather than a terrorist bomb—was determined.

There has been no such probe into the destruction of four hijacked airplanes, the twin towers of the World Trade Center and a large section of the Pentagon. One year after September 11, the US government has not even released the passenger lists maintained by the airlines, the information from the two data recorders recovered from the doomed planes, or the transcripts of communications between the pilots and air traffic controllers on the ground. No evidence has been presented to confirm that 19 Arab men actually boarded the planes, to show that they were, in fact, the hijackers, or to identify them by their real names and nationalities.

The Bush administration has barred virtually any release of information about September 11. For nearly six months, it successfully blocked congressional hearings and rebuffed calls for a special commission of

inquiry. Then it worked out a deal with the Democratic and Republican congressional leaders to consign the investigation to hearings held jointly by the House and Senate intelligence committees. These hearings have been held behind closed doors, with the promised public hearings repeatedly postponed.

This official stonewalling is the most staggering fact about September 11, one largely ignored by the American media.

Last May and June the cover-up by the Bush administration received a severe jolt. A series of media reports emerged documenting the fact that US intelligence agencies received advance warnings of the terrorist attacks. Among the revelations:

- * In July 2001 an FBI agent in Arizona sent a memo to headquarters noting the presence of Islamic fundamentalist students at a local flight training school, and urging a nationwide check for similar activity. It went unanswered.

- * In August 2001 FBI agents in Minneapolis asked for permission to investigate Zaccarias Moussaoui, an Islamic fundamentalist they believed might be planning to hijack a 747 jet on a suicide mission. FBI headquarters refused.

- * In August 2001 Bush was briefed by the CIA about the danger of hijackings organized by Al Qaeda, but no increased security was ordered for airlines or airports. Nor was there any mobilization of air defense units.

- * On September 9, Bush had on his desk, awaiting his signature, a draft National Security Decision Directive for war against Afghanistan, drawn up and approved by his top advisers a week before the World Trade Center attack.

The Bush administration deliberately diverted attention from these revelations, issuing a series of unsubstantiated and hysterically worded terror alerts, announcing that it would establish a new Department of Homeland Security, and then claiming that a Chicago man arrested earlier, Jose Padilla, was an Al Qaeda operative who had planned to explode a radiological "dirty bomb" in an American city.

Once the intelligence committees began their closed-door hearings, the Bush administration counterattacked, seizing on press reports that the National Security Agency had intercepted Al Qaeda communications the day before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Vice President Cheney charged that someone in Congress was virtually guilty of treason for leaking this information, and the FBI began investigating its investigators, the members and staff of the two intelligence panels. The result: public hearings were pushed back to late September, and could be postponed even further.

The administration has gone so far as to deny to the victims' families themselves basic information about the suicide-hijackings. Citing a "grave threat to national security," government lawyers have obtained court orders barring the disclosure of evidence sought by family members for use in damage lawsuits against the airlines, the airport security firms and others whose negligence may have contributed to the success of the

hijackings.

Senator Richard Shelby, the senior Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee, conceded in an interview on the anniversary of September 11 that there was enormous pressure from the Bush administration to shelve the hearings entirely. He indicated that significant new revelations about the terrorist attacks could emerge, which he described as “bombshells.”

There is no innocent explanation for the Bush administration’s conduct. There are no national security secrets to protect about the details of the hijackings, of which Al Qaeda is much better informed than the American people. Bush, Cheney & Co. conduct themselves like men with something to hide. Their methods of cover-up and provocation indicate a consciousness of guilt and a fear of exposure.

What are they afraid of? Until an objective and impartial investigation proves otherwise—the kind of investigation that cannot be carried out by any branch of the American state—it is not possible to state definitively what the connection is between the US government and September 11. But there are several likely scenarios.

One scenario is that at least some of those involved in the attacks were known to the US government, not merely as possible terrorism suspects, but as past collaborators. This is highly plausible given the longstanding ties between the American government and Islamic fundamentalist terrorists—heavily recruited and financed in the 1980s for guerilla warfare against the Soviet army in Afghanistan.

The revelations that have emerged constitute prima facie evidence that elements within the US state apparatus were running interference for those who organized the hijackings, protecting them from surveillance and arrest through a virtual stand-down of normal counterintelligence and air defense procedures.

Complicity on the part of these forces does not necessarily mean that September 11 was organized in every detail by the US government. It is quite possible that those who facilitated the activities of the hijackers thought that a standard hostage-taking was being planned, and did not envision the scale of the damage and casualties. They might have wanted the action to go forward to provide a suitable pretext for American military intervention in Central Asia and the Middle East, for which a simple hijacking would have sufficed. It is undeniable that the Bush administration seized on the September 11 atrocities as the pretext for implementing far-reaching war plans long in the making.

Whatever the exact connection, the White House is clearly frightened that any serious investigation into September 11 would produce a political uproar, plunge the Bush administration into a deep political crisis, and disrupt its plans for wider war.

A central question in analyzing any crime is “who benefits?” There is no question that from that standpoint, September 11 has allowed the extreme right-wing faction of the American ruling elite, which seized the White House through a Supreme Court-sanctioned political coup, to carry out a program that they knew had little popular support.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has raised many of the issues that need to be investigated and questions that need to be asked about September 11—questions that strongly suggest the attacks did not come out of the blue and catch the US government totally unawares.

* Why did FBI headquarters rebuff the concerns of agents in Minneapolis and Arizona who cited the threat of hijackings by Islamic fundamentalists?

* Why did FBI headquarters block any serious investigation into Zaccarias Moussaoui, arrested more than a month before September 11?

* Why was Mohammed Atta, the alleged organizer of the attacks, permitted to enter and leave the United States freely despite having been under surveillance by US intelligence agents in Europe as a suspected terrorist?

* Why were two of the hijackers, Khalid Almihdhar and Nawaf al

Hazmi, allowed to live freely in San Diego in the months before September 11, and even have their number listed in the phone book, although they were on a CIA watch list as suspected terrorists?

* Why has none of the essential information about the hijacked flights been released: the list of passengers, black box recordings, flight data recorded by air traffic control facilities?

* Five of the hijackers were reported to have trained at US military facilities. What were they trained for, and why?

* What are the connections between Al Qaeda and bin Laden personally, and the CIA and other US intelligence agencies that sponsored the Islamic fundamentalist groups in Afghanistan for more than a decade?

* What electronic information on the activities of Al Qaeda was available to the US government prior to September 11, and why was it not acted on?

* Why were US air defense fighters not ordered into action as soon as the first hijacking was reported by air traffic controllers?

* Why did US Attorney General John Ashcroft stop flying commercial airliners in July 2001, and why did a group of high Pentagon officials on September 10 cancel flights scheduled for the next morning?

* Who are the speculators who made huge futures bets against the stocks of American Airlines and United Airlines—but not the stocks of other airlines—in the week before the hijackings?

Recent press reports have raised new questions. The British newspaper *Independent* reported September 7 that a top Taliban emissary provided secret warnings to the US government that Osama bin Laden was planning a major attack on American soil. The warning was delivered by an aide to Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil, the Taliban foreign minister at the time, who was concerned that a terrorist strike within US borders would provoke, as it did, an American invasion of Afghanistan.

The Taliban emissary first went to Pakistan, where he met US Consul General David Katz and another American official, possibly from the CIA, in the city of Peshawar during the third week of July 2001. He delivered the message that bin Laden was preparing a “huge attack,” but his two interlocutors did not pass on the warning to Washington.

This brings to five the number of countries that warned US intelligence of the upcoming attacks: Germany, Russia, Israel and Egypt, as well as Afghanistan.

In its issue dated September 16, *Newsweek* magazine revealed that an FBI informant was the roommate of Khalid Almihdhar and Nawaf Alhazmi, the two hijackers who later lived in San Diego while they were on a CIA watch list. The two first arrived in San Diego in January 2000, allegedly after attending a meeting in Malaysia of Al Qaeda operatives.

According to the magazine, “In September, 2000, the two moved into the home of a Muslim man who had befriended them at the local Islamic Center. The landlord regularly prayed with them and even helped one open a bank account. He was also, sources tell *Newsweek*, a ‘tested’ undercover ‘asset’ who had been working closely with the FBI office in San Diego on terrorism cases related to Hamas.”

A year later, when Almihdhar and Alhazmi were identified as two of the hijackers whose plane struck the Pentagon, the informant called his case agent, according to the *Newsweek* account. “I know those guys,” he said. “They were my roommates.”

Insofar as the American media has published anything that questions the official version of September 11, it is only to suggest that the CIA and FBI were incompetent bureaucracies that failed to adapt to new forms of terrorist attack, or even (in the most ludicrous and reactionary version), were too restrained by their own democratic principles to conduct effective counterintelligence actions.

This attitude is expressed quite clearly in the most important American media outlet, the *New York Times*. The leading US newspaper has denounced criticism of the Bush administration for blocking an investigation into the terrorist attacks, calling such comments “gotcha

politics.”

This indulgent attitude is in stark contrast to the conduct of the *Times* during the right-wing campaign to subvert and destabilize the Clinton White House. The newspaper sanctimoniously condemned the slightest failure on the part of the White House to divulge details of the president’s sex life or to produce documents on a 20-year-old failed real estate investment.

But there are no editorial blasts from the *Times* about the Bush administration’s refusal to permit any investigation into the biggest single act of mass murder in US history, nor any calls for the appointment of an independent commission or a special prosecutor.

In the two weeks leading up to the anniversary of September 11, the *Times* has used its news pages to conduct a virtual campaign of exoneration of the CIA, the FBI and the Bush administration against any suggestion of negligence, let alone complicity, in relation to September 11. Thus an August 28 article on the Zaccarias Moussaoui case cited uncritically a Senate report suggesting that FBI counterterrorism experts were merely “ignorant of federal surveillance laws” when they refused to allow the Minneapolis agents to press for a search warrant. It reported as fact the absurd suggestion in the Senate document that FBI supervisors were simply too scrupulous about observing constitutional safeguards.

On September 8 the *Times* published a lengthy commentary on the factors that contributed to the failure to prevent the attacks. The entire article amounted to a diversion from the real issue of government foreknowledge and the government’s failure to act on what it knew. Among the red herrings advanced in this article were “the complacency Americans shared about the security of their continent,” due to the existence of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans; “innate resistance” to intrusive domestic spying, “along with other pressures to preserve civil liberties”; failure to recruit spies inside movements like Al Qaeda because of “a retreat from traditional espionage”; and even a slow start for the Bush administration because of “the bitter battle over the disputed 2000 election.”

Finally, on the eve of the anniversary, the *Times* published a lengthy recounting of the movements of the various Al Qaeda operatives who played the main role in organizing the September 11 attacks. This contains the following paragraph, describing the alleged organizer of the hijackings, Mohammed Atta:

“Mr. Atta himself was a near perfect person to carry out the plot. He had no record of terrorist activities and so he would not be under suspicion by Western intelligence agencies. He was well-educated and spoke both German and English fluently, which would enable him to operate without difficulty in the United States. He was also a grimly determined man, disciplined, reliable and not likely to flinch.”

This comment alone brands the *Times* account as a cynical whitewash. It is well known and well publicized in Europe—although generally concealed by the US media—that Atta was under surveillance by US intelligence for several months during 2000. According to the German public television channel ARD, Atta was followed as he traveled between Hamburg and Frankfurt and bought large quantities of chemicals that could be used in making explosives.

By way of exception, *Washington Post* columnist William Raspberry noted recently: “The CIA was monitoring hijacking leader Mohamed Atta in Germany until May 2000—about a month before he is believed to have come to the United States to attend flight school. Does it make sense that the monitoring stopped when he entered this country?”

The American media systematically avoids drawing the political conclusion that flows from the growing list of revelations, the inconsistencies and implausibilities in the official version of events, and the open hostility of the government to any investigation or public accounting: the Bush administration has something to hide. What it is hiding, moreover, must be of great significance, given the enormous effort

being expended.

Congress, the Democratic Party and the American media are all implicated in a sordid effort to conceal the truth from the American people and the world.



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