

US congressional hearings on September 11: more evidence of provocation and cover-up

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The first week of public hearings before the joint congressional committee investigating the September 11 terrorist attacks has been a clear demonstration of why the White House fought so bitterly to derail any official investigation into the events of one year ago.

Despite the Bush administration's stonewalling and the cowardice of the congressional Democrats, the current hearings have produced significant new information on US government foreknowledge of the terrorist attacks and its failure—or refusal—to prevent them.

Among the new facts not previously made known to the American public:

- * From 1998 on, the CIA and FBI received repeated warnings about Al Qaeda using airplanes to strike targets inside the United States.

- * In 2000 the FBI's Newark, New Jersey office received details of plans to hijack a Boeing 747 jumbo jet with a team of five or six men, and either fly it to Afghanistan or blow it up.

- * The volume of warnings about terrorist attacks within the US increased sharply in the spring of 2001, and a CIA informant specifically warned of "spectacular and traumatic" attacks on buildings like the World Trade Center.

- * Despite the frequency of such warnings, neither the CIA nor the FBI took any serious action. The CIA had only three analysts working full-time on Al Qaeda until 2000, when the number rose to five. The FBI had only one person working full-time on Al Qaeda on September 11, 2001.

- * The CIA had identified three of the future hijackers as associates of Al Qaeda in 2000—Khalil Almihdhar, Nawaf Alhazmi and Salem Alhazmi—but waited 18 months before it alerted other government agencies, although the CIA knew that Almihdhar and Nawaf Alhazmi were in the United States and that Almihdhar had a multiple reentry visa, allowing him to come and go freely.

- * Only two weeks before the September 11 attacks, an FBI agent in New York City sent a memo to Washington pleading for authorization to deploy resources to find Alhazmi and Almihdhar, warning that otherwise "people will die."

Many of these revelations were detailed at the first public hearing September 18, where Eleanor Hill, staff director of the joint congressional panel, gave a lengthy opening report on what the US government knew about the activities of Al Qaeda and what it did with the information. She explained that US intelligence agencies had received information on the possible use of airplanes as terrorist weapons beginning in 1994, with New York City and Washington among the probable targets. "While this method of attack had clearly been discussed in terrorist circles," she said, "there was apparently little, if any effort, by intelligence community analysts to produce any strategic assessments of terrorists using aircraft as weapons."

Beginning in June 1998, the warnings and information became more specific. According to Hill, "In August 1998, the intelligence community obtained information that a group of unidentified Arabs planned to fly an explosive-laden plane from a foreign country into the World Trade

Center.... In September of 1998, the intelligence community obtained information that bin Laden's next operation would possibly involve flying an aircraft loaded with explosives into a US airport and detonating it. This information was provided to senior US government officials in late 1998."

In October and November 1998, intelligence agencies received information on Al Qaeda efforts to establish cells in the United States and to stage terrorist attacks "involving aircraft in the New York and Washington, DC areas." Other reports concerned plans for assassination of US intelligence officials, as well as the secretary of state and secretary of defense. Similar reports continued in 1999 and 2000.

In April 2001, according to Hill, "the intelligence community obtained information from a source with terrorist connections, who speculated that bin Laden would be interested in commercial pilots as potential terrorists. The source warned that the United States should not focus only on embassy bombings, that terrorists sought 'spectacular and traumatic' attacks and that the first World Trade Center bombing would be the type of attack that would be appealing."

During the period between March and September 2001, Hill testified, "the intelligence community detected numerous indicators of an impending terrorist attack, some of which pointed specifically to the United States as a possible target." This information, gathered by the CIA and the military intelligence, was eventually shared with the FBI, the INS, the Customs Service and the State Department, and "was included in a closely held intelligence report for senior government officials in August 2001." The reference is to President Bush, although Hill was not allowed to say so because of White House-imposed secrecy.

In June 2001, the CIA's Counter-Terrorism Center "had information that key operatives in Osama bin Laden's organization were disappearing while others were preparing for martyrdom." A month later, an individual returning from Afghanistan reported that "everyone is talking about an impending attack."

Hill cited a briefing prepared for "senior government officials" at the beginning of July 2001, which warned that Osama bin Laden "will launch a significant terrorist attack against US and/or Israeli interests in the coming weeks. The attack will be spectacular and designed to inflict mass casualties against US facilities or interests. Attack preparations have been made. Attack will occur with little or no warning."

A major section of Hill's report addressed the intelligence information on the possible use of airplanes as weapons. Her testimony directly contradicted the claims of top White House aides like National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, who told a White House news conference last May, "I don't think anybody could have predicted that these people would take an airplane and slam it into the World Trade Center ... that they would try to use an airplane as a missile."

According to Hill, "the intelligence community was aware of the potential for this type of terrorist attack." She cited events as far back as December 1994, when an Algerian group hijacked an Air France jetliner and tried to crash it into the Eiffel Tower. A year later Philippine police

uncovered plans for the bombing of airliners and the crashing of a hijacked plane into CIA headquarters. In 1996 Iranian terrorists allegedly planned to hijack a jetliner and crash it into downtown Tel Aviv, and in 1998 a Turkish group planned a suicide attack involving the crashing of a jetliner into a crowd of government officials gathered for a ceremony at the tomb of Kemal Ataturk.

The Philippine case aroused special interest in the CIA. The agency's 1995 National Intelligence Estimate cited the plan, adding, "Our review of the evidence suggests that the conspirators were guided in the selection of the method and venue of the attack by carefully studying security procedures in place in the region. If terrorists operating in this country, the United States, are similarly methodical, they will identify serious vulnerabilities in the security system for domestic flights."

More than a year before September 11, the FBI's Newark office interviewed a walk-in informant who claimed that he had been at a bin Laden training camp in Pakistan. According to Hill, "He also stated that he was supposed to meet five to six other individuals in the United States who would also participate in the plot. They were instructed to use all necessary force to take over the plane, because there would be pilots among the hijacking team." The team was either to fly the plane to Afghanistan or destroy it, the informant said. He passed a lie detector test, but the investigation went no further.

In the context of such reports it is impossible to believe the Bush administration's claims that FBI headquarters made an innocent mistake when it ignored warnings from the Phoenix and Minneapolis FBI offices about Islamic fundamentalists training at US flight schools. On July 10, 2001, Phoenix FBI agent Kenneth Williams wrote a memo to Washington noting the presence of an inordinate number of militant Islamists at Arizona flight schools. He suggested a wider national investigation.

On August 16, 2001, the Minneapolis FBI was notified of the peculiar conduct of Zacarias Moussaoui, who had sought flight training, and had him detained for violation of INS regulations. The Minneapolis bureau contacted Washington but was denied permission to search Moussaoui's computer and take other investigative actions. At one point, seeking to jolt his superiors into action, one local FBI official described Moussaoui as someone who might fly a jumbo jet into the World Trade Center.

Given all the other reports flooding the FBI and CIA, as detailed in Hill's testimony, there is no question that the inquiries from Phoenix and Minneapolis should have touched off alarms in Washington. Instead, the Williams memo was stamped "routine" and buried; the Minneapolis requests were denied. Even in the minds of the Minneapolis FBI agents, it has been reported, the suspicion arose that Moussaoui was receiving official protection from Washington.

The handling of Almihdhar and Nawaf Alhazmi raises similar questions about where to draw the line between alleged incompetence and possible collusion. The CIA had obtained Almihdhar's name and passport number even before a January 2000 meeting in Malaysia of Al Qaeda operatives, where he was among those photographed by Malaysian police who staked out the meeting at the urging of the United States.

Nawaf Alhazmi came to the agency's attention when he accompanied Almihdhar on a flight back to the United States from the Malaysia meeting. The two men moved to San Diego, where they made no attempt to hide. They rented an apartment and were listed in the phone book. Almihdhar got a photo ID from the California Department of Motor Vehicles under his real name.

In the course of 2000, CIA analysts established a link between Almihdhar and the man believed to be the principal organizer of the terrorist attack on the US destroyer Cole, which was hit by a suicide bomber in October of that year, with the loss of 16 sailors' lives. But no alert was put out for Almihdhar or his associate, Alhazmi, until August 23, 2001.

Even then, tight restrictions were placed on any effort to find the two

men. A special agent at the FBI's New York office called FBI headquarters in Washington on August 29, 2001 to seek permission to launch an aggressive search. Senior FBI officials turned him down. The New York agent replied with an e-mail—cited in Hill's report—warning that "someday someone will die" and that "the public will not understand why we were not more effective and throwing every resource we had at certain 'problems'."

The purported reason for denying the request was a legal restriction on using intelligence information to open a domestic criminal investigation. But such factors cannot explain why the FBI could not be bothered to look in the San Diego phone book or visit the address listed there for the terrorist suspects.

The New York agent confirmed this account in testimony before the congressional panel September 20, where he was hidden behind a screen to keep his identity secret. Two weeks after he wrote the e-mail, Almihdhar, Nawaf Alhazmi and Salem Alhazmi bought tickets, again under their real names, and boarded American Airlines Flight 77, the plane that crashed into the Pentagon.

In the course of the first week of hearings the staff and members of the joint committee repeatedly criticized the Bush administration for blocking the investigation. The White House's refusal to release many of the mundane details of the events surrounding September 11 cannot be explained from the standpoint of national security concerns. It is itself an important piece of evidence that the government has something to hide.

In opening her testimony, Hill reported that she was unable to reach agreement with the White House on declassifying information on two issues: references to what information the intelligence services provided to the White House, and the name of a key Al Qaeda leader allegedly involved in the September 11 attacks.

The Bush administration refused to allow any testimony about what President Bush knew and when he knew it, even when the substance of the information communicated to him had been subsequently made public. This was clearly an attempt to protect Bush from political embarrassment, either because, as a figurehead in his own administration, he was told relatively little, or because he had critical information and failed to take defensive action.

As for the name of the Al Qaeda operative, Hill noted that the White House, not the CIA, "has declined to declassify his identity, despite an enormous volume of media reporting on this individual that has been out there for some time." The individual is clearly Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, described in press reports as the mid-level Al Qaeda leader who pushed for using hijacked airliners as the specific method of conducting terrorist attacks in the United States.

At one point during the first day's hearing, Senator Richard Shelby of Alabama, the ranking Republican on the Senate panel, said, "I have the feeling that there's more out there, because I raised this morning—I raised the issue in opening statements that I don't believe, as a member of the committee, that we've had the utmost support by the agencies that we're investigating. And I don't believe that we've had the support that was promised at the outset by the administration."

This led to the following exchange between Shelby and Hill:

Shelby: In the light of part of your statement I just referred to, you're saying that they're—according to your investigation, there was not any analysis of these terrorist tactics in the intelligence community, regarding the—

Hill: There was no—there was no analysis of the likelihood of the use of airplanes as weapons as a terrorist tactic.

Shelby: I wonder why not.

On the second day of the hearing, a panel of administration officials testified, headed by Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz. The Bush administration flatly refused to produce the two senior officials, Secretary of State Colin

Powell and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, to discuss September 11. This stance led to several bitter exchanges with committee members.

At one point Wolfowitz—a notorious scaremonger when it comes to the alleged threat of Iraq—told the panel that he had no idea of whether the US military-intelligence establishment had ever considered the likelihood of a terrorist attack on the United States. “I am not aware of any specific assessment of what the threat was domestically,” he claimed. Republican Congressman Saxby Chambliss of Georgia responded, “This is amazing, just amazing.”

Despite occasional hostile comments and the release of some new information about September 11, the real function of the joint congressional investigation is to provide a legislative rubberstamp to the cover-up of September 11 being carried out by the Bush administration. The hearings feature only enough heat and sufficient new details to give a veneer of credibility to the process.

Hill and the two co-chairmen, Democratic Senator Bob Graham and Republican Congressman Porter Goss—a former CIA agent himself—repeatedly declared that the 400,000 pages of documents reviewed by the committee staff had provided no “smoking gun.” Such remarks only demonstrate that the congressional panel has willfully closed its eyes to the barrage of evidence suggesting that the US intelligence services played an important role in permitting, or even facilitating, the terrorist attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people.

It is particularly significant that the congressional investigators have said nothing about the US government surveillance of the supposed ringleader of the suicide hijackings, Mohammed Atta. It has been widely reported in the German press that Atta was under FBI or CIA surveillance in Germany between January and May of 2000. He was monitored traveling between his home in Hamburg and the city of Frankfurt, where he reportedly bought large quantities of chemicals that could be used in bomb-making. [See *Der Tagespiegel*, September 27, 2001; *Focus* magazine, September 27, 2001; www.berlinonline.de October 18, 2001; ARD television network, November 23, 2001.]

The American media has been largely silent on the fact that Atta was a terrorist suspect before he was given an American visa and allowed to enter the US and attend flight-training school. Atta left the US several times and reentered without hindrance, even though at one point he was stopped for questioning because he was in violation of the terms of his visa. There is no innocent explanation for his treatment, which suggests that he was under US government protection. But not a single question was raised on the subject at the hearings before the joint congressional committee.

Any genuine investigation of September 11 would not be limited to seeking information about incompetence or bureaucratic foot-dragging by the FBI and CIA, but instead would examine the evidence of active collaboration of American intelligence agencies with Al Qaeda, going back some 20 years to the CIA’s covert war in Afghanistan. The real godfather of Al Qaeda was President Reagan’s CIA Director William Casey, who pursued a policy of recruiting Islamic fundamentalists from all over the world, training them in terrorism and guerrilla warfare, and dispatching them to Afghanistan. Bin Laden himself first came to prominence as a CIA asset in Afghanistan, building roads and camps for the US-backed guerrillas fighting the Soviet army.

These longstanding links between the CIA and Al Qaeda make nonsense of the claims that it was impossible for the agency to infiltrate bin Laden’s organization or track its operations.

The refusal to raise such basic questions demonstrates that the next step in the congressional response to September 11, the establishment of a 10-member commission of inquiry, will only continue the cover-up in a new guise. The Senate voted 90-8 Tuesday to adopt legislation sponsored by Democrat Joseph Lieberman and Republican John McCain to establish an independent commission, evenly divided between Democrats and

Republicans, to investigate September 11.

The bill’s adoption is tantamount to an admission by Congress that its own investigation is utterly inadequate. But the new probe promises nothing better, since the 10 members will be appointed by the Democratic and Republican congressional leadership, with its members chosen from among former government officials who can be expected to protect the key state agencies—the CIA, FBI, Pentagon, White House, etc.—whose role in the September 11 attacks are at issue.

The Senate only acted, after months of delay by the Democratic leadership, when the Bush administration dropped its opposition to the establishment of the commission. In other words, the White House has been assured that the new commission will be just as toothless and deferential to “national security” as the joint intelligence committee probe.



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