

Kissinger resigns as head of September 11 probe

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The resignation of Henry Kissinger, only two weeks after he was appointed by President Bush to head the bipartisan commission investigating the September 11 terrorist attacks, underscores the extraordinary degree of resistance in official Washington to any effort to organize an inquiry into the role of the US military and intelligence apparatus in those events.

More than 15 months have passed since nearly 3,000 innocent people were incinerated in the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and not a single official has been held responsible for what is by all accounts the greatest security failure in US history. As the stonewalling intensifies, more and more people will be compelled to draw the conclusion that the Bush administration has something to hide.

The former secretary of state sent a letter to the White House which bitterly attacked suggestions that he might face a conflict of interest as head of the investigation because of the numerous international clients, including both giant American corporations and Persian Gulf princes, who pay lucrative fees to his consulting firm, Kissinger Associates.

The Bush administration initially sought to exempt Kissinger from the financial disclosure requirements normally required of high government officials, on the grounds that he was appointed by the president, not Congress, and was serving part-time without a federal salary. But after protests from representatives of the families of victims of September 11, congressional Democrats and Republicans said that Kissinger would have to follow the usual disclosure procedure.

Kissinger Associates, a privately held company founded by the former Nixon aide, does not disclose even the identity of its clients, let alone the nature of the ventures for which it provides consulting services. Press accounts have identified a few of Kissinger's corporate paymasters, including ExxonMobil, ITT, American Express, Anheuser-Busch, Coca-Cola and H.J. Heinz.

In his letter to Bush, Kissinger denied that there was any conflict between the interests of his clients and a full investigation into September 11, but expressed the fear that "the controversy would quickly move to the consulting firm

I have built and own."

"To liquidate Kissinger Associates cannot be accomplished without significantly delaying" the work of the commission, he said. "I have, therefore, concluded that I cannot accept the responsibility" of the chairmanship.

Kissinger stepped down on Friday, December 13, two days after the man selected as vice-chairman of the commission, former Democratic Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, also withdrew, claiming that the work of the commission could not be part-time and that he could not afford to leave his New York law firm for the duration of the 18-month probe.

Mitchell left the Senate in 1994 and became a traveling troubleshooter for the Clinton administration, dealing with such foreign policy crises as Northern Ireland and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While the difficult and protracted nature of these conflicts apparently did not deter Mitchell, the pitfalls of an investigation into September 11 did.

House and Senate Democrats immediately named former congressman Lee Hamilton to replace Mitchell, but the White House has not yet named a successor to Kissinger. Only one of the five Republican slots on the commission has been finalized: former Senator Slade Gorton of Washington state.

Bush's nomination of Kissinger was part of a long-drawn-out campaign of stonewalling and resistance to any serious investigation into the worst terrorist attack in US history. From September 11 on, the White House opposed any investigation at all, then agreed to a tightly controlled and limited probe by the House and Senate intelligence committees, whose members have close relations to the CIA and FBI.

Only under public pressure from the families of the victims of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, especially around the time of the first anniversary of the tragedy, did the White House back down and give verbal assurances that an official bipartisan commission would be established. The administration tried to renege on this agreement almost immediately, and fought successfully

to remove language requiring such an investigation from the text of the legislation establishing the Department of Homeland Security.

The White House only agreed to back a congressional resolution establishing the bipartisan commission after Democrats conceded on two major points which gave the Bush administration effective veto over the commission's findings: Bush was to appoint the chairman of the commission, and six votes out of ten were required for issuing any subpoena, insuring that the five Republican members could block subpoenas of Bush administration officials if the White House so directed.

This last provision was slightly softened by giving two Republican senators who were early backers of the bipartisan commission, Richard Shelby of Alabama and John McCain of Arizona, a role in selecting one of the Republican members. They put forward the name of former senator Warren Rudman of New Hampshire, but Senate Republican Trent Lott has refused to nominate Rudman because he is considered too critical of the role of the CIA and FBI before September 11.

In selecting Kissinger, the Bush administration aimed to install as chairman and leader of the inquiry an individual who could be relied on to conduct a cover-up of the role of the US government before and on September 11. What are 3,000 dead American civilians to a man responsible for prolonging the Vietnam War for seven years, at the cost of 30,000 American lives and perhaps a million Vietnamese?

Kissinger is synonymous not only with Vietnam, but with bloody and illegal operations by the US military and intelligence services all over the world: the secret bombing of Cambodia, the CIA-backed military coup in Chile, and close relations with barbaric military dictatorships from Indonesia to Pakistan to Greece and throughout Latin America.

It appears that a critical moment for Kissinger came last Wednesday when a delegation from the families of victims of September 11 came to his New York office to discuss the conflict of interest issue. In the course of the meeting, they gave him a list of questions they wanted the bipartisan commission to answer. According to a spokesman for the group, these questions included:

- * Why did the Immigration and Naturalization Service allow so many of the hijackers into the country to attend flight school?

- * Why did the nation's air defense command have no planes in the air on September 11 to protect New York and Washington once the attacks had begun?

- * How many hijackers were on the CIA's terrorist watch list, and if any of them were known to intelligence agents, why were the FBI and the Federal Aviation Administration

not notified?

It must have been clear to Kissinger that he would face unprecedented public scrutiny as he attempted to carry out the job of whitewashing the performance of the US government before and on September 11.

It is impossible to raise such questions seriously, let alone answer them, without calling into question the preposterous claim by the Bush administration—parroted endlessly and uncritically by the media—that the suicide hijackings took the US government completely by surprise. Far more likely is that the events of September 11 were permitted, or even directly authorized, at a high level within the US government, to provide a catalytic event to trigger a worldwide program of American military aggression.

By themselves, the conflict of interest charges which Kissinger faced have explosive implications. Kissinger was a pioneer in the grubby business of converting a foreign policy portfolio into millions of dollars in fees as an international “consultant,” with much of this money flowing in from companies doing business in the Middle East.

Among those who have followed in his footsteps are former President George H.W. Bush, the current president's father, who made millions as a representative for the Carlyle Group, the private investment firm whose major investors for many years included the wealthy bin Laden family of Saudi Arabia.

Bush reportedly shut down an ongoing US investigation of the bin Laden family when he took office, and members of the family living in the United States were hurriedly flown back to Saudi Arabia—with the approval of the Bush administration—within days of September 11.

Kissinger is wanted in several European and Latin American countries on charges relating to the death squads and military coups he supported during his tenure as national security adviser and secretary of state from 1969 to 1976. Any serious investigation into September 11 could place many of the current leaders of the US government in similar legal and political jeopardy.



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