

Family members demand answers from 9/11 commission

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Survivors of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and family members of some of those who were killed testified last week at public hearings held in New York City by the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks on the United States. These were the first public hearings conducted by the commission.

While the Bush administration is using September 11 as a pretext for its war in Iraq as well as its crackdown on civil liberties at home, the questions put to the panel underscored the fact that 19 months after the attacks on New York and Washington, the most basic facts about the worst acts of mass murder in US history have yet to be disclosed.

The hearings were held only blocks from the spot where the World Trade Center towers once stood, and a number of those in the audience held pictures of relatives—firefighters, office workers and others—who died after two hijacked passenger jets struck the Twin Towers.

In a number of cases, the questions were pointed and expressed deep-seated frustration with Washington's refusal to provide any serious explanation for how four passenger jets could be hijacked simultaneously and three of them used to attack the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, claiming the lives of more than 3,000 people.

Representing a group called September 11 Advocates, Mindy Kleinberg, who lost her 39-year-old husband, Alan, in the World Trade Center, asked, "But where was our government, its agencies and institutions prior to and on the morning of September 11?" She went on to detail a long list of extraordinary security lapses, none of which have been satisfactorily explained.

She pointed to suspicious options trades the week before September 11, in which large investors bet on a short-term drop in the stock price of United and American Airlines. While both the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and US intelligence agencies maintain sophisticated systems to monitor unusual activities in markets worldwide, these extraordinary deals apparently provoked no alarm.

"Why were these aberrant trades not discovered prior to 9/11?" she asked. "Who were the individuals who placed these trades? Have they been investigated? Who was responsible for monitoring these activities? Have those individuals been held responsible for their inaction?" The investors in question, whose names have never been disclosed, have yet to claim the \$5 million in profits their timely bets generated.

She then held up copies of visa applications submitted by a number of the alleged hijackers. She pointed out that they were either incomplete or contained inappropriate answers, and noted that according to standard procedures they should have been automatically rejected. Next she reported that nine of the alleged hijackers were singled out for questioning as they purchased their tickets, but each was allowed to proceed, box cutters and all.

Kleinberg also reviewed in detail the government's failure to scramble fighter jets to intercept the hijackers. While the hijacking of American Airlines Flight 11 was known as of 8:20 a.m., the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) failed to notify the North American Aerospace

Defense Command (NORAD) for another 20 minutes, and an additional 12 minutes passed before the first jets took off. This extraordinary and unexplained lapse occurred despite the fact that NORAD was in the midst of its semi-annual exercises known as "Vigilant Guardian," in which its forces are placed on the highest state of readiness.

Even after Flight 11 slammed into the North Tower at 8:46 a.m., the pattern of delay was repeated with the three other hijacked planes. American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon at 9:41 a.m., an hour and 21 minutes after the first hijacking was confirmed. Fighter jets finally went up to protect Washington DC, but they were sent not from Andrews Air Force Base, just outside the capital, but from Langley AFB in southern Virginia.

"On September 11 both the FAA and NORAD deviated from standard emergency operating procedures," Kleinberg concluded. "Who were the people that delayed the notification? Have they been questioned?"

Finally, she raised questions about the activities of President Bush on the morning of the attacks, which he spent visiting an elementary school in Florida. "Before the president walked into the classroom, NORAD had sufficient information that the plane that had hit the World Trade Center was hijacked," she said. "At the time, they also had knowledge that two other commercial airliners, in the air, were also hijacked. It would seem that a national emergency was in progress. Yet President Bush was allowed to enter a classroom full of young children and listen to the students read. Why didn't the Secret Service inform him of this national emergency?"

Stephen Push, whose wife, Lisa Raines, was killed on board Flight 77, also raised questions about why US intelligence agencies failed to prevent the terrorist attack. Referring to Khalid Almihdhar and Nawaf Alhazmi, whom the CIA identified as attending a meeting of Al Qaeda operatives in Malaysia in early 2000, Push stated that "two of the hijackers on Lisa's plane were known to the CIA nearly two years before the attacks, but nevertheless were allowed to enter the country, live here for months, and board the plane using their own names."

Mary Fetchet, co-chair of the group Voices of September 11, played a tape of her last phone message from her son Brad, age 24, as he tried, unsuccessfully, to escape from the 89th floor of the South Tower. She excoriated President Bush for saying two weeks afterwards that the September 11 attacks were a "wake-up call" to a "new danger," and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice for her ignorant claim, made as late as May, 2002, that before September 11 nobody thought terrorists "would try to use an airplane as a missile."

Referring to the numerous intelligence warnings about just such an action being planned, Fetchet declared, "September 11 should have been predictable. The loss of life in the 1993 bombing [of the World Trade Center] and the continued threats specifically against the World Trade Center... should have been *the* wake-up call.... How could this happen and who is accountable?"

Another witness, Harry Waizer, expressed skepticism toward the

commission itself. After describing his harrowing personal experience of escaping Tower One after the elevator he was riding in was hit by a fireball, as well as the numerous surgeries and infections he has suffered ever since, he noted his concern that the findings of the commission would end up being ignored.

While the relatives and victims voiced hope that the commission's investigation would finally yield some answers, it is apparent that the real mission of this supposedly independent commission is to complete the official cover-up of the events of September 11, 2001. Commissioners repeatedly stated that their mission was not to "point fingers" or hold anyone accountable for what was, at the very least, the most staggering national security failure in US history.

The fact that the commission's work is only now getting under way, more than a year and a half after the fact, and with a minimal budget of \$12 million, is symptomatic of the ongoing whitewash. By contrast, NASA's investigation into the space shuttle Columbia disaster, which killed seven people, is expected to cost some \$40 million, and the government spent \$50 million investigating Whitewater, a 20-year-old failed real estate deal involving the Clintons.

The law establishing the commission requires its report to be issued by May 2004, with no extension provided even though the first four months have been consumed with naming the panel and obtaining security clearances. The deadline was chosen not out of any consideration for the volume of work required, but with an eye to the political calendar in an election year. The report is to be released after the major presidential primaries are over, but well before the summer conventions and the fall election campaign, by which time it is hoped the subject will have been long buried.

From the beginning the Bush administration, with the connivance of Congress, has opposed any serious investigation into September 11, claiming absurdly that finding out just how this atrocity could occur would obstruct efforts to prevent future attacks. Under pressure to maintain some semblance of credibility, the administration reluctantly agreed last spring to a closed-door joint investigation by the House and Senate Intelligence committees.

Even this tightly controlled probe became too much for the Bush administration to stomach after a series of explosive revelations concerning warnings made in the months prior to September 11, 2001 by both FBI field offices and foreign intelligence agencies. Bush's claim that no one could have predicted terrorists seizing passenger jets and crashing them into buildings was proven a lie. Evidence was uncovered proving that there were warnings precisely to that effect.

Combined with the wealth of information documenting ties between the CIA and US foreign policy establishment and Islamic fundamentalist groups, including the precursors of Al Qaeda, the revelations increasingly posed the question of whether those involved in the September 11 hijackings enjoyed protection from some level of US intelligence.

In an effort to intimidate the congressional investigators, the FBI was ordered to reverse the tables and investigate the investigators, supposedly to find out who had leaked word about two messages intercepted by the National Security Agency on September 10 alluding to the attack due to occur the following day.

Only a few months ago, Congress finally released a limited report that focused on bureaucratic ineptitude and the so-called "failure to connect the dots." The report avoided any inquiry into the CIA's collaboration with Islamic fundamentalists, including Osama bin Laden, dating back to the US-supported guerrilla war against the pro-Soviet government of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Some 500 pages of the congressional report remain sealed on the grounds of national security.

Dissatisfied with this congressional cover-up, groups representing the families of victims of September 11 pressed for an independent investigation. Bush reversed his long-held opposition to such an

investigation after meeting with family representatives. He then withdrew his agreement to form a commission until gaining assurances that this probe would be just as toothless as the congressional investigation.

He won agreement on two particular issues: that he would appoint the chairperson, and that a 60 percent majority of the 10-member panel would have to approve any subpoena, thus giving the five Republican members veto power to prevent embarrassing witnesses from being summoned to testify.

Any doubt that the commission was embarked on another whitewash was removed last November with Bush's naming of Henry Kissinger to serve as the panel's chairman. Notorious for his role in engineering war crimes behind the backs of the American people, such as the secret bombing of Cambodia and Laos in 1969 and the CIA-backed overthrow of the Allende government of Chile in 1973, there could hardly have been a more reliable Washington insider put in charge.

Kissinger's appointment, however, created a furor that threatened to discredit the panel entirely. He was forced to resign only 17 days later, after refusing demands of the family groups that he comply with standard conflicts-of-interest requirements by publicly identifying the clients of his consulting firm.

As Kissinger's replacement, Bush tapped the less controversial but still politically well-connected Thomas Kean. It quickly emerged that the former New Jersey Republican governor had his own conflict-of-interest problems. To supplement his salary as president of Drew University, Kean earned \$172,523 as a director of the oil giant Amerada Hess.

Until three weeks before Kean's appointment, Amerada Hess participated in a joint drilling venture in Azerbaijan with a Saudi company, Delta Oil, one of whose backers is Osama bin Laden's brother-in-law, Khalid bin Mahfouz, who, according to a *Fortune* magazine report, does business with the Carlyle Group, the investment consortium in which George Bush Sr. plays a prominent role.

Another directorship that shows up on Kean's lengthy resume is with the federally funded National Endowment for Democracy. Set up during Ronald Reagan's first term as an above-ground adjunct of the CIA, this outfit has been involved in the attempts of successive US administrations to undermine democratically elected foreign governments from the Nicaraguan Sandinistas in the 1980s to the Venezuelan government of Hugo Chávez today.

The list of the other nine panel members also reads like a "Who's Who" of Washington insiders. The vice chairman is former Democratic Congressman Lee Hamilton, who served on the House Intelligence Committee until his retirement in 1999. He currently serves as an advisor to President Bush on homeland security, on Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's National Security Study Group, and on the CIA Economic Intelligence Advisory Council.

Another panel member, newly retired Democratic Congressman Tim Roemer, actually participated in the Congressional investigation as a member of the House Select Committee on Intelligence.

Other panelists include Clinton-era deputy attorney general Jamie Gorelick, who is now a director of both Schlumberger, Ltd, one of the world's largest oil service companies, and the major defense contractor and airline engine manufacturer United Technologies. She also serves on the CIA's National Security Advisory Panel.

Also on the panel are two former presidential legal counsels: Fred Fielding, who served Ronald Reagan and now does legal work for two top Bush fundraisers, and Richard Ben-Veniste, a former Watergate prosecutor who served as defense attorney for Bill Clinton as well as an attorney for Democratic National Committee Chairman Terry McAuliffe.

In an obvious conflict of interest, no less than five of the panel members work for law firms that represent US airline companies, including American and United.

Besides the makeup of the panel itself, the choice of witnesses, other

than the family members and victims who were selected to testify, provides an indication of the nature of the report that will be produced. One witness, Randall Larsen, director of the Institute for Homeland Security, echoed the Bush line by urging the investigation to focus on preventing future terrorist attacks rather than going into the details of September 11. Another witness, Abraham Sofaer, former legal advisor to the US State Department under Reagan and Bush Sr., took the opportunity to “laud” the current Bush administration’s policy of using preemptive force to fight terrorism.

As if to reassure the Bush administration, after the hearings Kean told reporters that the committee would focus its attention on the issues of border control and money laundering, since Congress had already largely investigated the intelligence failures. “We are not going to try to go out of our way to assess blame,” he said.

The commission’s hearings received scant media attention, drowned out by the celebratory coverage of the ongoing slaughter in Iraq. Despite the wealth of unanswered questions about September 11 and the raw emotions of those who survived or lost loved ones in the attacks, there is no desire by any of the major media organizations to independently probe these issues.

The Kean commission’s determination to leave these questions untouched is one more indication that the political establishment has much to hide from the American public about these tragic events.



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