

September 11 commission complains of “intimidation” and stonewalling

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The federal commission investigating the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington charged July 8 that its work was being hampered by the reluctance of federal agencies to hand over documents or provide witnesses for unimpeded interview by commission staff.

A statement issued by the Republican chairman and Democratic vice chairman of the commission, former New Jersey governor Thomas Kean and former congressman Lee Hamilton, singled out the Pentagon for criticism for withholding information relating to NORAD, the joint US-Canadian air defense command, which failed to mobilize jet fighters in time to intercept any of the four airliners that were hijacked on the day of the attacks.

The commission has sought millions of documents from 16 federal agencies, but the vast majority of the documents have not yet been produced, even though the commission has used nearly half the time it was allotted by Congress for conducting the probe. It is due to present its report by May 27, 2004.

The statement issued by the commission warned that “problems that have arisen so far with the Department of Defense are becoming particularly serious.” It appealed for fuller cooperation by the Bush administration in the remaining months of the inquiry.

At a news conference accompanying the release of the statement, Kean and Hamilton called attention to the administration’s insistence that all government witnesses be accompanied by officials representing their agencies when interviewed by commission staff.

Media observers have compared this to the Iraqi government’s use of official “minders” to sit in on interviews by UN weapons inspectors. At the time, the Bush administration declared that such tactics proved Saddam Hussein had something to hide.

Kean told the press conference, “I think the commission feels unanimously that it’s some intimidation to have somebody sitting behind you all the time who you either work for or works for your agency. You might get less testimony than you would. We would rather interview these people without minders or without agency people there.”

The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States was established last fall, more than a year after

the destruction of the World Trade Center, after ferocious opposition by the Bush administration. The White House backed down only in the face of protests by the families of September 11 victims, which threatened to embarrass the administration in the weeks before the November 2002 congressional elections.

Bush initially appointed former secretary of state Henry Kissinger as the commission’s chairman, in a transparent attempt to insure that the investigation would protect both the Republican administration and the national security apparatus. Kissinger stepped down within two weeks, however, after refusing to make public his business connections and activities in the Middle East.

Kean, the governor of New Jersey from 1983 to 1991, who is considered a moderate within the Republican Party, was appointed to replace Kissinger. The other Republican members include former Navy secretary John Lehman, former senator Slade Gorton of Washington state, former Illinois governor Jim Thompson and Washington attorney Fred Fielding, who was a deputy counsel in the Nixon White House.

The Democrats include Hamilton, who chaired the House Foreign Affairs Committee in the 1980s and early 1990s and now heads a foreign policy think tank in Washington; former senator Max Cleland of Georgia; former congressman Timothy Roemer of Indiana; Richard Ben-Veniste, a Washington lawyer and former Watergate prosecutor; and Jamie Gorelick, vice chairman of the Federal National Mortgage Association, who served as deputy attorney general in the Clinton administration. The commission’s executive director is Philip Zelikow, a University of Virginia historian who recently edited the White House tapes of Kennedy administration discussions during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

Despite the fact that its members are all firmly ensconced within the American political establishment, there have been many indications that the Bush administration nonetheless regards the commission’s very existence as a serious political danger. Several commission members have raised sensitive questions about the role of the White House and the national security apparatus before and during September 11.

In April and May, the commission came into conflict with a CIA-run declassification committee that refused to provide

documents relating to Saudi Arabia's role in the terrorist attacks. Fifteen of the 19 hijackers were Saudi nationals, and the bin Laden family, from which Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden is reputedly estranged, is one of the wealthiest in the kingdom.

There have been allegations that Saudi diplomats and members of the royal family gave financial and other aid to some of the future hijackers. Extensive information on this subject was compiled in the 900-page report drafted by a joint House-Senate intelligence committee that conducted a limited investigation into September 11 last year.

One reason for the government's sensitivity about Saudi connections to Al Qaeda and the September 11 attacks is the fact, well known within the political establishment but suppressed by the media, that the former president and father of the current White House occupant had business links and personal dealings with the father of Osama bin Laden.

The House-Senate report is scheduled to be made public July 24, in a heavily censored version, but the September 11 commission has been seeking access to the full text. The CIA has identified more than 60 pages worth of deletions, including all references to the role of foreign governments, whether relating to their warnings of terrorist attacks or their possible complicity in the operations of Al Qaeda.

So strict has the Bush administration censorship been that Roemer, who participated in the House-Senate investigation and retired from Congress after the November elections, has been denied access to transcripts of hearings at which he was present last year as a member of the House Intelligence Committee.

The commission has also sought minutes of the National Security Council from the spring and summer of 2001 that refer to warnings by the CIA and other intelligence agencies of imminent attacks by Al Qaeda. It also wants to interview National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and her deputy, Stephen J. Hadley, on what they knew and what they told the president about these warnings.

At a hearing on May 23, commission members questioned aviation experts and FAA officials on whether the FAA promptly notified NORAD of the hijacking of American Airlines Flight 77, which was not intercepted before it hit the Pentagon more than an hour after the first jetliner hit the World Trade Center.

Diametrically opposed responses were given to some questions. Mary Schiavo, former inspector general of the Department of Transportation, criticized FAA and airline security procedures, saying, "The notion that these hijackings and terrorism were an unforeseen and unforeseeable risk is an airline and FAA public-relations management myth."

Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta, on the other hand, claimed the government was caught entirely unawares. "I don't think we ever thought of an aircraft being used as a missile."

According a *Los Angeles Times* account, "some commission

members argued there were plenty of indications that terrorists were planning a major attack against this country in the months before Sept. 11. These members said they were stunned by Mineta's comments and by how they conflicted with other testimony."

One of the Republican members of the commission, former Navy secretary John Lehman, told *Time* magazine last month that the commission would ask both George W. Bush and Bill Clinton to appear to discuss what their administrations knew about Al Qaeda before September 11. "I don't think any commission should ever formally call a president to testify," he told the magazine, "but I think it is very much in the country's interest—and in both President Clinton's and President Bush's interest—to meet directly with the commissioners."

The extreme sensitivity of the ultra-right milieu around Bush to any serious investigation into September 11 was expressed in an editorial July 10 in the *Wall Street Journal*, entitled, "9/11 Mischief, A Commission Turns into an Exercise in Partisan Score-settling."

Without citing any evidence, other than the commission's demand for faster production of documents, the *Journal* denounced the panel as incorrigibly partisan. It actually has five Republicans and five Democrats, with all the Republicans appointed by the White House and Republican congressional leaders.

After suggesting that the Bush administration should simply refuse to cooperate with the commission, the *Journal* said the commission would be better employed if it investigated the Clinton administration's alleged dismantling of US defenses in the 1990s, rather than the actual circumstances surrounding September 11, 2001. Failing that, the commission should delay its report until after the 2004 election, the *Journal* advised.

What concerns the Bush White House and its media defenders is that any objective examination of the antecedents and circumstances of September 11 will raise politically explosive issues, ranging from whether the US government received advance warning of the attacks and failed to take action to forestall them, to the false claims of Iraqi involvement in 9/11 that were used to buttress Bush's case for invading and occupying the country.



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