

# Bush lied to NYC on post-9/11 pollution crisis

Bill Vann  
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The Bush White House intervened in the weeks following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks to suppress warnings by the Environmental Protection Agency of health hazards associated with the toxic cloud of dust and debris created by the collapse of the World Trade Center, according to a report issued by the agency's inspector general.

The highly critical 165-page report indicates that agency officials were pressured to issue misleading assurances that the air quality in New York City was safe, in part because of White House concerns that Wall Street be speedily reopened for financial trading.

These lies helped create the conditions in which thousands of "Ground Zero" rescue workers contracted serious illnesses, and many residents of lower Manhattan and parts of Brooklyn, as well as infants born after the September 11 disaster, have had their health placed at risk.

On the day after the terrorist attacks, the report revealed, the office of then-administrator of the EPA Christine Whitman issued an extraordinary memo instructing agency personnel that, "All statements to the media should be cleared through the NSC (National Security Council) before they are released."

Under pressure from the White House and the NSC, "reassuring information was added" and "cautionary information was deleted" from EPA public statements on the potential health hazards following the September 11 attacks, the internal report stated.

The EPA inspector general's investigators were able to recover original drafts of statements prepared by the environmental agency and compare them to those that were released after being revised by the Bush White House.

For example, a press release prepared by the EPA for Sept. 13, 2001 reported that the agency's samplings had detected "very low levels of asbestos" in the air, but noted that "even at low levels, EPA considers asbestos hazardous in this situation and will continue to monitor" the situation. It added that it would work with authorities to assure that the hazardous material was handled properly.

After being revised under orders from the White House, the final release stated: "EPA is greatly relieved to have learned that there appears to be no significant levels of asbestos dust in the air in New York City...Short-term, low-level exposure of the type that might have been produced by the collapse of the World Trade Center buildings is unlikely to cause significant health effects...the general public should be very reassured by initial samplings."

Similar revisions were made to a September 16 press release issued on the eve of concerned employees returning to worksites on Water Street near Ground Zero. The original release noted,

"Recent samples of dust gathered by OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] on Water Street show higher levels of asbestos in EPA tests." After passing through the hands of the White House censors, the final release read: "The new samples confirm previous reports that ambient air quality meets OSHA standards and consequently is not a cause for public concern."

And, in a September 18 statement, Whitman announced that the air in lower Manhattan was "safe to breathe." At that time, the report says, the agency "did not have sufficient data and analyses to make the statement." The EPA had yet to receive results from its initial tests for PCBs, dioxin and a host of other toxic substances. The inspector general's report added, "The answer to whether the outdoor air around WTC was 'safe' to breathe may not be settled for years to come."

The unfounded claims by the EPA that there existed no serious environmental threat in lower Manhattan were echoed by then-New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who ridiculed those raising concerns.

"We knew at the time that the smoke and dust from the collapse was a serious health hazard and we made our best effort to get the word out to workers and the general public," said New York Committee on Occupation Safety and Health director Joel Shufro. "But it is difficult to make a big impression when you have federal and city officials falsely claiming they have the scientific basis for saying that everything is safe."

Other information deleted from EPA releases at the request of the White House included warnings about the special risks posed by the pollution in lower Manhattan to young children, the elderly and those with existing respiratory problems.

Likewise, Bush administration officials ordered the agency to remove recommendations that both residential and commercial buildings undergo "professional cleaning" before being reoccupied. Instead, the final release simply told people to follow instructions from New York City officials, who at the time were overwhelmed with the rescue and recovery effort and lacked the expertise to make valid recommendations.

To this day, there has yet to be an adequate cleanup of lower Manhattan, with many businesses and residences still contaminated from the toxic dust of September 11. Under substantial public pressure, the agency approved only a limited cleanup of residences south of Canal Street in lower Manhattan. According to the report issued by the inspector general, approximately 18,000 residential units in this area have yet to be tested or cleaned. The EPA, meanwhile, has refused even to do testing in non-residential spaces, including work-sites and schools. It has likewise excluded areas of the city—Lower East Side and

Brooklyn—that were covered by the toxic cloud blowing from the World Trade Center site.

The report indicates that in the aftermath of September 11, the agency was essentially hijacked by the Bush White House and its National Security Council. In every instance, EPA officials bowed to demands that recommendations based on scientific evidence be replaced with politically motivated reassurances that everything was safe.

“We were unable to identify any EPA official who claimed ownership of EPA’s WTC press releases issued in September and early October 2001,” the report states. “When we asked the Chief of Staff if she could claim ownership...she replied that she was not able to do so ‘because the ownership was joint ownership between the EPA and the White House,’ and that ‘final approval came from the White House.’ She told us that other considerations, such as the desire to reopen Wall Street and national security concerns, were considered when preparing EPA’s early releases.”

How “national security” was enhanced by lying to people in New York City about the dangers posed by breathing air laced with asbestos, PCBs, lead, glass fibers and other toxic chemicals is nowhere spelled out in the report.

The impact of the government’s lies, however, has become painfully clear. A study by the Mount Sinai School of Medicine found that 78 percent of World Trade Center rescue and recovery workers suffered lung ailments and 88 percent had ear, nose and throat problems as a result of exposure to toxic materials at the site. Tens of thousands of workers were involved in the rescue and cleanup effort. Up to 500 New York City firefighters remain out of work on disability because of lung problems and most are expected never to return.

Dubbed “World Trade Center cough,” the illness is seen by some doctors as a new disease syndrome. It results in reduced lung capacity and extreme sensitivity to any inhaled particles, bacteria and viruses. Triggered by second-hand smoke, car exhaust, cleaning agents and even cold air, it leaves those afflicted gasping for air.

Others affected include thousands of day laborers, for the most part undocumented immigrants, who were brought into lower Manhattan to clean up dust-filled apartments and offices, working invariably with no protection.

The inspector general’s report noted that many of those involved in the rescue effort failed to wear respirators even when they were available. While this was due in part to the disregard for personal safety in the initial desperate effort to find survivors in the rubble, another significant factor was the reassurances offered by both the EPA and the federal Occupation Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) about air quality.

“Workers at Ground Zero may not have used respirators due, in part, to inadequate EPA and other government communication,” the report said. It cited statements from both a director of an environmental testing firm hired to conduct testing at the site and construction company officials as stating that they interpreted EPA statements as indicating that the air at Ground Zero was safe to breathe.

Safety and health advocates have questioned whether the same kind of White House pressure exerted upon the EPA was also used

against OSHA. The latter agency adopted the position that it had no authority to enforce federal safety standards at Ground Zero because it was a rescue effort conducted under the government’s National Response Plan.

Another study has revealed a potentially horrific effect of the collapse of the World Trade Center and the pollution from the resulting fires that burned for the next four months. It found that expectant mothers exposed to the polluted air gave birth to abnormally small babies.

“Our best guess is that women who were exposed to overly large quantities of soot on 9/11 and the succeeding days developed the same problem you see in women who smoke during pregnancy,” said Dr. Philip Landrigan, one of the authors of the study, which appeared earlier this month in the Journal of the American Medical Association. The study is to continue monitoring the children until they are three years old to determine whether there are lasting effects from their mothers’ exposure.

Doctors in hospitals in both lower Manhattan and Brooklyn, meanwhile, have reported a major increase in asthma and chronic bronchitis cases.

The EPA’s acting administrator, Marianne Horinko, dismissed the inspector general’s report as “out of touch with reality.” From the content of the report, it would seem that the “reality” Horinko had in mind consists of the reactionary politics of the Bush administration and the overriding demands of Wall Street investors. The inspector general’s report appears to take as a point of departure the agency’s mandate to protect the environment and the health of the American people rather than the reality of an agency that consistently subordinates such considerations to profit interests.

The government lying exposed by the EPA inspector general constitutes criminal activity in the strictest sense of the word. The statements issued in the name of the agency and at the behest of the White House constituted the reckless endangerment of millions of people and have contributed directly to destroying the health of many thousands. The long-term effects of exposure to the toxic cloud in lower Manhattan are not known, and many may yet pay with their lives for the Bush administration’s lies.

Significantly, those in the White House responsible for deleting safety warnings and recommendations from the EPA’s post 9/11 announcements stonewalled the inspector general’s efforts, refusing to meet with investigators. This is part of the pattern of concealment and lying that has pervaded the Bush administration’s response to any attempt to probe the September 11 attacks, what led up to them and their aftermath.



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