

War criminal to probe mass murder

Ex-Senator Bob Kerrey appointed to 9/11 panel

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In a change of personnel that signals a further tightening of the Bush administration's reins on the supposedly independent probe into what happened on September 11, 2001, former Nebraska Senator Robert Kerrey was tapped Tuesday to sit on the 10-member panel investigating the terrorist attacks.

The former Senator, who is currently president of the New School of Social Research in New York City, is a consummate US intelligence insider whose foreign policy views are closely aligned with those of the Bush administration. In its report on the appointment, the *Washington Post* described Kerrey as "an influential figure in intelligence circles who has also been a strong supporter of CIA Director George J. Tenet." In the Senate, Kerrey served as the ranking Democrat on the intelligence committee.

Kerrey's appointment to the bipartisan panel, formally known as the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, follows the Bush administration's sudden expediting of the nomination to a position on the Export-Import Bank of Max Cleland, like Kerrey a former Democratic senator (from Georgia) and a veteran of the Vietnam War.

Cleland, whose wounds in Vietnam left him a triple amputee, had emerged as the panel's most caustic critic of the Bush administration's stonewalling tactics. He is also an opponent of the US war in Iraq. He was virtually the only member of the commission to give voice to the intense frustration of 9/11 victims' family groups, which have expressed increasing skepticism that the administration will allow a genuine investigation.

Last month, Cleland denounced the agreement reached between the White House and the commission's leadership to severely limit access to documents that are key to determining what the administration knew about the threat of terrorist attacks before September 11.

The deal, accepted by the panel's chairman, former New Jersey Republican Governor Thomas Keane, and Democratic Vice-Chairman Lee Hamilton, a former congressman from Indiana, governs access to Presidential Daily Briefs. These are daily summaries of US intelligence reports provided to the president.

According to press reports, one of these briefs, issued on August 6, 2001—a month before some 3,000 people were killed at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—warned the White House of plans by Al Qaeda to mount terrorist attacks using hijacked airplanes.

Rather than issuing subpoenas demanding the full panel's unrestricted access to these crucial documents, the leadership of the panel agreed to a rigged procedure in which only one commissioner and one staff member will be allowed to review selected portions of the briefs and write summaries of them, with the White House then vetting the final material, removing whatever it sees fit.

"If this decision stands, I, as a member of the commission, cannot look any American in the eye, especially family members of victims, and say the commission had full access," Cleland said following the announcement of the deal. "This investigation is now compromised.... This is 'The Gong Show;' this isn't protection of national security."

In October, Cleland told the *New York Times*: "As each day goes by, we learn the government knew a whole lot more about these terrorists before September 11 than it has ever admitted."

Last month, in an interview with *Salon*, he went further, suggesting a motive for the administration's failure to act on such knowledge: "They had a plan to go to war [with Iraq] and when 9/11 happened, that's what they did; they went to war."

Less than two weeks later, the White House sent Cleland's nomination to the Export-Import Bank to the Senate, which acted on it the same day as Kerrey's appointment.

The Bush administration had strongly opposed establishing a panel to investigate September 11 and has worked to keep the events of that day shrouded in secrecy. When finally, in November 2002, it reluctantly bowed to pressure from victims' families to form a commission the White House attempted to install Henry Kissinger as the panel's chairman.

The proposed nomination of Kissinger set off a firestorm of criticism, first because of clear conflict of interest issues: the former US secretary of state's privately held consulting firm represents numerous corporations and foreign governments, and he refused to submit to standard disclosure requirements.

Second, Kissinger is implicated in some of the greatest crimes and cover-ups ever carried out by the US government. The period during which he oversaw foreign policy—1969-1976—witnessed the escalation of the Vietnam War and the fomenting of a series of fascist-military coups in Latin America.

With the naming of Kerrey to the panel, similar questions are raised. Kerrey is himself no stranger either to war crimes or cover-ups. His entire political career has been founded on both.

In 1969, Kerrey, then a Navy lieutenant, led a SEAL unit in a death squad attack on a Vietnamese village in which he and six enlisted men under his command killed 21 women, children and elderly men. The massacre was carried out as part of “Operation Phoenix,” a CIA-run program that targeted political supporters of the Vietnamese liberation movement for assassination and claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Vietnamese civilians.

For more than 30 years, Kerrey remained silent on the 1969 massacre. When it was exposed by the publication of a *New York Times* magazine article in April 2001, he continued to evade responsibility, speaking only in the vaguest terms about his actions. Last year, he published an autobiography, *When I Was a Young Man*, that amounted to yet another attempt to cover up his own role in the massacre.

The appointment of an individual who is himself responsible for a war crime against unarmed civilians in Vietnam to investigate the greatest act of mass murder ever conducted against civilians in the US is a measure of the cynicism of the entire US political establishment, and its contempt for the right of the public to learn what really happened on September 11.

The selection of Kerrey was made not by Bush, it should be pointed out, but rather by the Senate minority leader, Thomas Daschle (Democrat of South Dakota).

Kerrey’s own conflicts of interest are myriad. As vice-chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Kerrey is a veteran of political cover-ups. While Kerrey was no longer a senator at the time, the committee on which he had served as the highest-ranking Democrat carried out a whitewash of the government role in 9/11, together with its House counterpart, in their toothless joint investigation of the terrorist attacks last year.

Kerrey was also one of the key figures who approved the nomination of CIA Director Tenet and has remained his defender and political ally. What the CIA knew before September 11 is one of the key questions facing any legitimate investigation into the events.

The former senator is also complicit in the Bush administration’s manipulation of the September 11 events to justify a war, already decided upon, against Iraq. Little more than a year ago, Kerrey surfaced as a leading member of an outfit known as the “Committee for the Liberation of Iraq,” formed to promote an unprovoked invasion of the Middle Eastern country.

The group, in which Kerrey was the only prominent Democrat, was essentially an offshoot of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), a Republican think tank that served as a virtual administration-in-waiting. Its principals included Richard Cheney (now vice president), Donald Rumsfeld (now defense secretary), Paul Wolfowitz (Rumsfeld’s deputy secretary), George Bush’s younger brother Jeb, the governor of Florida, and Lewis Libby (Cheney’s chief of staff). The PNAC elaborated a blueprint for achieving US global hegemony by means of military force, beginning with a war against Iraq.

Kerrey had himself been a proponent of a war against Iraq since 1998, joining right-wing Republicans in sponsoring the “Iraqi Liberation Act” and forging close political ties to the Iraqi National Congress, which is headed by the convicted bank embezzler Ahmed Chalabi.

In September of last year, Kerrey wrote an opinion column for the *Wall Street Journal* entitled “Finish the War: Liberate Iraq,” in which he echoed the Bush administration’s attempts to justify the war by falsely linking Iraq to the September 11 attacks. He repeated the phony claim that the alleged 9/11 hijackers’ ringleader, Mohammed Atta, had met with an Iraqi intelligence agent in Prague five months before the attacks. The allegation has been discredited repeatedly by US and foreign intelligence agencies, which say there is no evidence that Atta was ever in the Czech Republic or left the US during this period.

Max Cleland has now surrendered his seat on the September 11 commission to a Vietnam-era war criminal who participated directly in exploiting the 9/11 terrorist attacks to foster the war in Iraq. Cleland has done so to assume a comfortable position at the Export-Import Bank. His own role, alongside that of Daschle and Kerrey, underscores the complicity of the Democratic Party in the Bush administration’s cover-up of the events of September 11. The Democrats, no less than the Republicans, are particularly determined to conclude a whitewash well before the 2004 presidential election campaign goes into high gear.

The political establishment enjoys the full collaboration of the media in this endeavor. The September 11 commission has been ignored by the major television networks and cable news channels, and the controversies swirling around its deliberations have been minimally reported by the major newspapers. The supposed attempt to uncover the facts about the worst act of mass carnage in US history has received not even a fraction of the coverage lavished upon any number of celebrity scandals.



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