

Part one

What the September 11 commission hearings revealed

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[Part one](#) | [Part two](#) | [Part three](#) | [Part four](#)

The independent commission investigating the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington has held five days of televised public hearings and released hundred of pages of staff reports and other documents, including much new material on the activities of US intelligence and counterintelligence agencies in the period leading up to 9/11.

The information so far made public has shattered the official Bush administration version of September 11—that the suicide hijackings were an unanticipated and unforeseeable event and that no US government agency had any inkling that commercial jets would be seized and used as weapons. Several members of the commission have already declared that the evidence has convinced them the attacks could have been prevented.

What has emerged is a picture of defenses deliberately stood down—as commissioner Bob Kerrey described it, a government not at battle stations, but with “stacked arms.” Bush administration officials displayed an unaccountable degree of indifference to the prospect of a major terrorist operation unfolding on American soil. At one point in the summer of 2001, Attorney General John Ashcroft told acting FBI Director Thomas Pickard, after several briefings on the growing danger, that he didn’t want to hear any more on the subject. At about the same time, Ashcroft stopped using commercial flights for government business because of security concerns.

Likewise, Vice President Dick Cheney, designated the administration’s point man on the threat of terrorism, received several briefings at the FBI, including one on the Al Qaeda cells believed to be active within the US. But Cheney said little in response to these briefings, Pickard testified, and did less, even as he was acting as the “powerful steamroller” of the Iraq war, according to the book just published by Bob Woodward.

The high point of this seeming disinterest came on August 6, 2001, when Bush received a briefing on the threat of Al Qaeda while vacationing at his ranch in Crawford, Texas. There he received the now-famous CIA President’s Daily Brief (PDB) entitled “Bin Laden Determined to Strike Within US,” which mentioned targets in Washington and New York City and cited threats to hijack aircraft. The memorandum flatly contradicts Bush administration claims that the September 11 attacks came without warning.

The Bush administration took no action in response to the August 6 PDB. In fact, there was a general relaxation of security measures that had been tightened in May in response to a series of warnings from the CIA and other intelligence agencies about Al Qaeda threats. Airline security was not relaxed, but only because it had never actually been tightened. The airlines had been urged to be more alert, but the FAA never required them to take any concrete measures to prevent a hijacking, one of the most familiar of terrorist tactics.

This failure to act is so glaring that even the supine American media has been compelled to take notice. At his nationally televised press conference April 13, only the third such prime-time event in his presidency, Bush was asked directly what action he and his administration had taken in response to the August 6 PDB. Bush ducked the question and avoided any response. If the president had answered directly about his own reaction to the CIA briefing, he would have said: “I continued on my vacation for another three weeks.”

The White House had withheld the PDB for nearly two years, on the grounds that it contained information so sensitive that its release would damage US national security. Yet once it was made public, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice claimed the document was only a “historical review,” and provided no contemporaneous reporting on which the administration could have acted to forestall the terrorist attack five weeks later. Why then the secrecy?

Was the stand-down deliberate?

The September 11 commission has brought to light much new information on the period leading up to the attacks, but the much-publicized hearings have avoided the central question: was the extraordinary lack of vigilance a deliberate lowering of US defenses, carried out in order to permit terrorist attacks to take place and thereby create the conditions for the Bush administration to accomplish its goal of conquering Iraq and establishing US domination of the region where the bulk of the world’s oil resources are concentrated?

High-level national security officials of both the Bush and Clinton administrations told the commission that there was no public support before September 11 for US military intervention in the Middle East and Central Asia. Several of these witnesses explicitly stated that only the mass casualties at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon made such action politically possible.

One witness, former Bush counter-terrorism director Richard Clarke, charged that the White House seized on September 11 as the pretext for a war with Iraq that, in his words, undermined the struggle against terrorism. But the commission virtually ignored Clarke’s accusation, with Vice-Chair Lee Hamilton, a former Democratic congressman, declaring that the panel had not been set up to investigate the war in Iraq.

Not a single commissioner on the 9/11 panel has suggested, or even raised the possibility in a question, that the Bush administration not only used the terrorist attacks after the fact to achieve its foreign policy goals, but consciously facilitated them before the fact for that purpose. In their

investigation of one of the greatest crimes of this century, an act of mass murder in which nearly 3,000 people were slaughtered, the commissioners have failed to pose the most basic question: “Who benefits?”

A bipartisan ruling-class panel

This failure is entirely predictable. The 9/11 commission is not a panel of impartial investigators divorced from the political conflicts and class divisions within American society. It consists of ten tried and tested defenders of American imperialism, five Democrats and five Republicans, many with extensive experience in the national security apparatus. The staff director, Philip Zelikow, is a close associate of Condoleezza Rice who supervised the National Security Council transition from the Clinton to the Bush administrations.

The commissioners have three essential goals. First, they want to reveal enough about the background and circumstances of September 11 to maintain an aura of credibility and appease the public and the families of the victims. Second, they aim to prevent any significant damage to the key institutions of the state: the Pentagon, the intelligence agencies, the presidency itself. Third, they seek use the spotlight of the public hearings—and their eventual report, due in July—to push for a political agenda focused on strengthening the state and making possible more aggressive militarism abroad and more systematic repressive measures at home.

In both sets of recent hearings—the first, held last month and involving current and former national security officials, and the second, held earlier this month with a panel of current and former counter-intelligence officials—the commissioners have taken a similar bipartisan stand: Democrats and Republicans alike have demanded stronger and more far-reaching action to wage the “war on terror.”

In the national security phase of the public hearings, the tone was set by Kerrey, the former Democratic senator from Nebraska and currently president of the New School University in New York City, who was publicly exposed as a Vietnam-era war criminal three years ago for his role in killing women, children and old men in a raid by his Navy Seal unit, for which he won a commendation.

Kerrey repeatedly challenged Clinton administration officials on why they did not launch a full-scale military strike against Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan in 1998-99, rejecting their explanations that there was no public or international support for a US invasion of that country. (Since Afghanistan is landlocked, a US invasion force would have to pass through Iran, Pakistan or one of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia). It was the job of the president, he said, to shift public opinion and make the case for war, no matter how unpopular it might be.

He criticized both Clinton and Bush administration officials for failing to respond militarily to the terrorist attack on the USS Cole, the naval warship hit by a terrorist attack in Yemen in October 2000, which killed 17 sailors. Clinton aides said that they could not order retaliation until they knew who had carried out the attack, while Bush aides said that by the time the CIA had made a final determination that Al Qaeda was responsible, early in 2001, the case was “stale.”

During the counter-intelligence phase of the public hearings, several members of the commission took turns blasting the FBI and CIA, with the Republican chairman, former New Jersey Governor Thomas Kean, reading a statement in which he condemned the FBI, in particular, for bungling pre-9/11 security preparations.

The commissioners repeatedly suggested that the solution to the supposed “intelligence failure” on September 11 was to create a new, centralized super-agency to coordinate all domestic and foreign

counterintelligence operations, headed by a director who would control the entire \$40 billion US intelligence budget. This produced the curious spectacle of FBI and CIA officials reminding former elected officials of the danger of a police state.

Strengthening the state is not the same as defending all those who presently occupy high positions within it. Some heads may roll. It is quite possible that the 9/11 commission will issue a stinging criticism of particular officials in the FBI and CIA, or even the White House. It has already stepped on the toes of the Bush administration on several occasions. But it does so from the standpoint of building up the powers of the military/intelligence apparatus and facilitating further attacks on democratic rights at home.

The commission’s work is complicated by the fact that the investigation unfolds in an election year, and in the midst of a raging conflict within the ruling elite, fueled by the deteriorating military and security situation in Iraq. The Bush administration adamantly opposed the establishment of the commission and resisted demands for the disclosure of documents and the production of witnesses, although it was eventually forced to comply.

Kerrey remarked, to illustrate the divisions on the commission, that five of the panelists will vote for Kerry and five for Bush. One could just as easily note, however, that all ten support the war in Iraq, like the presumptive Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry and the incumbent, George W. Bush, and all ten are creatures of the American financial aristocracy, like Kerry and Bush.

In terms of the personalities involved, none of the five Republicans is associated with the Christian fundamentalist or neo-conservative factions so heavily represented in the Bush administration, while none of the five Democrats could be considered part of any “anti-war” faction of that party. They all fall into what would be considered the “middle of the road” in the American bourgeois political spectrum. In that sense, even before it finalizes its conclusions, the panel can be said to represent the broadest consensus within the US political establishment.

Two incidents with Ashcroft

The essential bipartisan unity of the commission was revealed in two significant incidents last week. Attorney General John Ashcroft threw the political equivalent of a stink-bomb into the proceedings in the course of his opening statement, when he laid the blame for the US government’s evident unpreparedness for September 11 entirely at the feet of the Clinton administration, claiming the much maligned “wall” between counter-intelligence and criminal investigations was the result of a memorandum drafted in 1995 by Jamie Gorelick, then deputy attorney general, now a Democratic member of the 9/11 commission.

Commissioner Slade Gorton, a former senator from Washington State and a Republican, made Ashcroft look ridiculous, asking him whether, in the course of the eight months prior to September 11, Ashcroft had made any effort to rescind the Gorelick memo. On the contrary, Ashcroft admitted, his own deputy attorney general, Larry Thompson, had reaffirmed Gorelick’s instructions in a memorandum of his own, issued August 6, 2001. Neither official was doing anything more than notifying Justice Department personnel of legal provisions adopted by Congress in the wake of Watergate-era domestic spying scandals.

Since then, both Republican and Democratic commissioners have sprung to Gorelick’s defense, in the face of a campaign by some right-wing Republican congressmen and such mouthpieces of the Republican right as the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Times* to force Gorelick to resign from the panel.

The second case of bipartisan collaboration involved Ashcroft as well.

Towards the end of the attorney general's appearance before the commission, Democrat Richard Ben-Veniste, a former Watergate prosecutor, took Ashcroft through an obviously rehearsed explanation of why he had stopped taking commercial flights for official business, beginning in the summer of 2001. The exchange was particularly striking because it came after harsh questioning from Ben-Veniste over Pickard's testimony that Ashcroft had dismissed the importance of counter-terrorism and cut the FBI's budget in that area.

Following his questioning concerning statements made by Pickard, Ben-Veniste abruptly changed the subject and made reference to the failure of the Warren Commission to address numerous conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination. The 9/11 commission should not make the same mistake, he suggested, and he offered Ashcroft the opportunity to answer persistent questions about his decision to stop using commercial aircraft and instead employ a leased jet—a move that sparked widespread speculation that Ashcroft and his aides had advance warning of impending hijackings. Ashcroft was ready with a prepared answer: he had continued to use commercial aircraft for private travel, but had stopped using them for official business, because of an assessment made by the Department of Justice security team.

The following exchange occurred:

Ashcroft: It was not related to a terrorism threat as a threat to the nation. It was related to an assessment of the security for the attorney general, given his responsibilities and the job that he undertakes. And it related to the maintenance of arms and other things by individuals who travel with the attorney general. And it was their assessment that we would be best served to use government aircraft. These were not private chartered jet aircraft. These were aircraft of the United States government. And it was on such an aircraft that I was on my way to an event in Milwaukee on the morning of September the 11th.

Ben-Veniste: I'm pleased to have been able to give you the opportunity to clarify that issue for all who have written to this commission and communicated in other ways about their questions about that, sir.

This answer was, despite Ben-Veniste's ready acceptance, a dodge. No such travel arrangements were made for Ashcroft's predecessor, Janet Reno, who was a constant target of threats, especially for her role in the 1993 Waco massacre. What changed in the few months between Ashcroft's taking over the Justice Department and his decision not to fly commercially? The matter remains to be investigated.

[Part one](#) | [Part two](#) | [Part three](#) | [Part four](#)



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