

Part four: A deliberate stand-down against airplane hijackings

What the September 11 commission hearings revealed

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

One of the standard claims of the Bush administration and its apologists has been that, before September 11, no one could have imagined the use of hijacked airplanes as flying bombs.

Perhaps the most categorical of these statements came in May 2002 from National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice.

She was responding to a barrage of press reports just after the existence of the now-famous August 6, 2001, Presidential Daily Brief had been made public. Contrary to the claims that the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon were a bolt from the blue, the White House was compelled to admit that Bush had been given a top-secret briefing by the CIA only five weeks before September 11, focused on the danger of Al Qaeda terrorist attacks on US soil.

The Bush administration was under fire for having concealed the existence of the briefing, and Rice was called on to address the issue at a press conference. Visibly distressed and agitated, she answered question after question, then finally declared: "I don't think anybody could have predicted that these people would take an airplane and slam it into the World Trade Center, take another one and slam it into the Pentagon, that they would try to use an airplane as a missile."

The use of planes as weapons

This contention was the subject of lengthy questioning by 9/11 commission member Richard Ben-Veniste, a Democrat and former Watergate prosecutor, in the course of the appearances by two witnesses, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and former FBI Director Louis Freeh. Ben-Veniste established two central facts: that US intelligence agencies had long considered the danger of hijacked airplanes being used as weapons; and that the Bush administration was aware of these concerns.

Responding to a comment by Rumsfeld during his appearance before the 9/11 commission in March, echoing Rice's mantra of "no one could have imagined," Ben-Veniste went through the litany of warnings assembled by the commission staff. These were based not even on intelligence sources, but on published reports widely available on the Internet. He challenged Rumsfeld, who was appearing side-by-side with General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to respond.

Ben-Veniste: With respect to your comment about domestic intelligence and what we knew as of September 10, 2001, your

statement was that you knew of no intelligence to suggest that planes would be hijacked in the United States and flown into buildings.

Well, it is correct that the United States intelligence community had a great deal of intelligence suggesting that the terrorists, back since 1994, had plans, discussed plans, to use airplanes as weapons, loaded with fuel, loaded with bombs, loaded with explosives. The Algerians had a plan in '94 to fly a plane into the Eiffel Tower. The Bojinka plot in '95 discussed flying an explosive-laden small plane into CIA headquarters. Certainly CIA was well aware of that.

There were plans in '97 using a UAV. In '98, an Al Qaeda—connected group talked about flying a commercial plane into the World Trade Center. In '98, there was a plot broken up by Turkish intelligence involving the use of a plane as a weapon. In '99, there was a plot involving exploding a plane at an airport. Also in '99, there was a plot regarding an explosive-laden hang-glider. In '99 or in 2000, there was a plot regarding hijacking a 747. And in August of 2001, there was information received by our intelligence community regarding flying a plane into the Nairobi embassy, our Nairobi embassy.

And so I suggest that when you have this threat spike in the summer of 2001 that said something huge was going to happen and the FAA circulates, as you mentioned, a warning which does nothing to alert people on the ground to the potential threat of jihadist hijacking, which only, it seems to me, despite the fact that they read into the congressional record the potential for a hijacking threat in the United States, in the summer of 2001, it never gets to any actionable level.

Nobody at the airports is alerted to any particular threat. Nobody flying the planes takes action of a defensive posture.

I understand that going after Al Qaeda overseas is one thing. But protecting the United States is another thing. And it seems to me that a statement that we could not conceive of such a thing happening really does not reflect the state of our intelligence community as of 2001, sir.

Rumsfeld: A couple of comments. I quite agree with you, there were a number of reports about potential hijacking. I even remember comments about UAVs [Unmanned Aerial Vehicles—i.e., drones]. I even have seen things about private aircraft hitting something. But I do not recall ever seeing anything in the period since I came back to government about the idea of taking a commercial airliner and using it as a missile. I just don't recall seeing it. And maybe you do, Dick?

Myers: No, I do not.

Ben-Veniste: Well, the fact is that our staff has—and the joint inquiry before us, I must say—has come up with eight or ten examples which are well known in the intelligence community. My goodness, there was an example of an individual who flew a small plane and landed right next to the White House.

Rumsfeld: I remember.

Ben-Veniste: Crash landed that. The CIA knew that there was a plot to fly an explosive-laden plane into CIA headquarters. So we do, within our intelligence community, have very much in mind the fact that this is a potential technique.

What US intelligence agencies knew

At the April public hearing, the 9/11 commissioner took FBI Director Freeh through the following discussion, which confirms that US intelligence agencies had considered the danger of hijacked airplanes being used as weapons as far back as the mid-1990s:

Ben-Veniste: Let me turn to the subject of the state of the intelligence community's knowledge regarding the potential for the use of airplanes as weapons, a subject of obvious interest to this commission. Did the subject of planes as weapons come up in planning for security of the Olympics held in Atlanta in 1996?

Freeh: Yes, I believe it came up in a series of these, as we call them, special events. These were intergovernmental planning strategy sessions and operations. And I think in the years 2000, 2001, even going back maybe to the 2000 Olympics, that was always one of the considerations in the planning. And resources were actually designated to deal with that particular threat.

Ben-Veniste: So it was well-known in the intelligence community that one of the potential areas or devices to be used by terrorists, which they had discussed, according to our intelligence information, was the use of airplanes, either packed with explosives or otherwise, in suicide missions?

Freeh: That was part of the planning for those events, that's correct.

Ben-Veniste then focused on the transition from the Clinton to the second Bush administration, and particularly the planning for the Genoa summit of the G-8 countries, in June 2001:

Ben-Veniste: Did that come up, the same subject, come up again? I know you carried on from the Clinton administration through six months, more or less, of the Bush administration. Did that subject come up again in the planning for the G-8 summit in Italy?

Freeh: I don't recall that it did, but I would not have been involved in that planning. The FBI would not have been involved in that particular planning.

Ben-Veniste: We were advised that there was a CAP or no-fly zone imposed over first Naples, in the preplanning session, and then Genoa during the meeting of the eight heads of state. And that subsequently it was disclosed the President Mubarak of Egypt had warned of a potential suicide flight using explosive-packed airplanes to fly into the summit meeting.

Freeh: I don't dispute that. But that planning would be done by

the Secret Service, probably the Department of Defense. We would not have been involved in that event outside the United States in terms of the special planning, although we probably detailed some people there.

The questioning then shifted to air defense plans against such suicide hijackings:

Ben-Veniste: Let me ask you this: To your knowledge, coming back to the United States, was the intelligence information accumulated by the year 2001 regarding various plots, real or otherwise, to crash planes using suicide pilots integrated into any air defense plan for protecting the homeland, and particularly our nation's capital?

Freeh: I'm not aware of such a plan.

Ben-Veniste: Can you explain why it was, given the fact that we knew this information, and given the fact that, as we know now, our air defense system on 9/11 was looking outward in a Cold War-posture, rather than inward, in a protective posture, that we didn't have such a plan? Was that a failure of the Clinton administration, was that a failure of the Bush administration, given all of the information that we had accumulated at that time?

Freeh: Well, I mean, I don't know that I would characterize it as a failure by either administration. I know, you know, by that time there were air defense systems with respect to the White House. There were air defense systems that the military command in the Washington DC area, you know, had incorporated. I don't think there were probably—at least I never was aware of a plan that contemplated commercial airliners being used as weapons after a hijacking. I don't think that was integrated in any plan.

Significantly, according to Freeh and Ben-Veniste, the Pentagon was involved in air defense plans for the Genoa summit, where for security reasons Bush slept on a US Navy ship anchored offshore, rather than in an Italian hotel. Anti-aircraft weapons were deployed around the city with orders to shoot down a hijacked plane that might target the assembled presidents and prime ministers. But no such precautions were taken in Washington DC.

The NORAD exercise

Coincident with last month's public questioning of CIA and FBI officials by the 9/11 commission, the *Washington Post* reported that the North American Aerospace Defense Command, NORAD, had discussed the possibility of a hijacked jetliner being flown into the Pentagon in a suicide attack only months before September 11—and after Rumsfeld had assumed control of the Department of Defense.

The *Post* article, published April 15, said: "While planning a high-level training exercise months before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, U.S. military officials considered a scenario in which a hijacked foreign commercial airliner flew into the Pentagon, defense officials said yesterday."

This report was based on an email message from a retired army officer, written just after September 11, defending the conduct of NORAD during the terrorist attacks. The air defense agency was widely criticized for the unaccountable delay in scrambling jet fighters over New York City and Washington after the four hijackings were reported to the FAA.

The officer recalled that the hijacking scenario had been proposed by one NORAD planner and was rejected by “Joint Staff action officers” as “too unrealistic.” His email also cited opposition from the US Pacific Command, which regarded the notion as a distraction from “their exercise objectives.” A Pentagon spokesman confirmed that the scenario had been suggested and rejected for the exercise, known as Positive Force, which was to practice control of military forces under wartime conditions where the Pentagon building itself had been made unusable.

NORAD’s role on September 11 will be the subject of further testimony before the 9/11 commission later in May. Forty-four minutes elapsed between the crash of American Airlines Flight 11 into the World Trade Center and the launching of fighters from the Langley Air Force Base in Virginia. No fighters were launched from Andrews Air Force Base, the closest facility to Washington.

It remains unclear when President Bush issued an order to authorize air defense fighters to shoot down hijacked airliners, and how or even whether that order was communicated through the Pentagon to NORAD fighter pilots. NORAD officers have said they did not learn of the order until 10:10 a.m. on the day of the attacks, after the fourth jet crashed in rural Pennsylvania. The agency initially failed to turn over documents sought by the 9/11 commission, forcing the panel to issue a formal subpoena to the Pentagon.

Why no precautions against an ordinary hijacking?

The “failure of imagination” claims fall to pieces if one simply accepts their premise and asks a logical follow-up question. Suppose it is conceded, against all the historical evidence, that no one in the Bush administration conceived of the possibility that hijacked airliners could be used as flying bombs. But what about measures to prevent a hijacking of the more familiar character, in which the hijackers seek to take the passengers hostage for some political purpose? It is clear from the record that elementary security precautions against such an attack were neglected.

On July 5, 2001, in response to multiple intelligence alerts and the constant pressure from Richard Clarke, the top counterterrorist official at the National Security Council, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and Andrew Card, the White House chief of staff, asked the heads of major domestic agencies to meet in the White House to be briefed by Clarke. The agencies summoned included, in addition to the FBI, the Federal Aviation Administration, the Customs Service, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

On July 6, an email message from Clarke to Rice outlined a number of steps agreed on at the meeting, including a decision that the FBI, CIA and Pentagon would develop “detailed response plans in the event of three to five simultaneous attacks.”

Yet the substance of these decisions was not communicated to the officials responsible for carrying them out. Neither FAA Administrator Jane Garvey nor her boss, Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta, was informed of the decisions of the July 5 meeting. The FAA issued a security warning to the airlines, urging greater awareness of the threat of hijacking, but did not require any specific actions. FBI field offices were never informed of the warnings of domestic terrorist attacks.

According to the 9/11 staff preliminary report, “Beginning on July 27, the FAA issued several security directives to US air carriers prior to September 11. In addition, the FAA issued a number of general warnings about potential threats, primarily overseas, to civil aviation. None of these warnings required the implementation of additional aviation security measures. They urged air carriers to be alert.”

Democratic commissioner Jamie Gorelick, deputy attorney general in the Clinton administration, raised the issue with Condoleezza Rice during her testimony April 8, but Bush’s national security adviser seemed tongue-tied.

Gorelick: And let me just give you some facts as I see them and let you comment on them.

First of all, while it may be that Dick Clarke was informing you, many of the other people at the CSG-level, and the people who were brought to the table from the domestic agencies, were not telling their principals. Secretary Mineta, the secretary of transportation, had no idea of the threat. The administrator of the FAA, responsible for security on our airlines, had no idea. Yes, the attorney general was briefed, but there was no evidence of any activity by him about this.

You indicate in your statement that the FBI tasked its field offices to find out what was going on out there. We have no record of that. The Washington field office international terrorism people say they never heard about the threat, they never heard about the warnings, they were not asked to come to the table and shake those trees. SACs, special agents in charge, around the country—Miami in particular—no knowledge of this. And so, I really come back to you—and let me add one other thing. Have you actually looked at the—analyzed the messages that the FBI put out?

Rice: Yes.

Gorelick: To me, and you’re free to comment on them, they are feckless. They don’t tell anybody anything. They don’t bring anyone to battle stations.

Former Senator Bob Kerrey, a Democratic commissioner who is a fervent supporter of the war in Iraq, summed up the contradictions in the Bush administration’s claim that it was surprised on September 11 despite being at “battle stations,” as Rice put it, against the threat of Al Qaeda terrorism. He was questioning former CIA counterterrorism chief Cofer Black, and he made reference to the tape-recorded discussion between Betty Ong, a flight attendant who died on one of the hijacked jets, and FAA controllers on the ground:

Kerrey: Let me ask you one last question: How in God’s name did this thing happen? I’ve got to tell you, I hear battle stations and everything we’re doing, and at our airports we were at ease. We were stacked arms. We were not prepared for a hijacking. And you may say, “Well, we didn’t know all the conspiracy”—a hijacking surprised us. That’s what Betty Ong said, when we heard her voice, that the government and the FAA—none of us were prepared for even a simple hijacking. How in God’s name did that happen?

Black: Am I meant to answer that, sir?

Kerrey: Yes. If you can. If can’t fine. I mean, I’m not sure I could.

Black: My answer is that I don’t know, but what I will say is that, from my perspective, that’s why we tend to be a group of pretty paranoid people who don’t get to sleep much.

Kerrey’s point is worth pondering. The warhawk senator expresses exasperation at the transparent falseness of the Bush administration’s claims that it had taken the threat of terrorist attacks seriously before 9/11. Even elementary precautions against conventional hijacking were not

taken, he points out. Why not? The suggestion that the entire, vast US intelligence apparatus went to sleep, folded up shop, “failed to imagine,” etc., is simply preposterous.

The far more plausible answer—which neither Kerrey nor Black can dare to utter—is that at some level the US government stood down its defenses deliberately. The Bush administration wanted a terrorist attack, perhaps an airline hijacking that would put at risk a few hundred people, to provide the pretext for the worldwide campaign of military aggression which has already seen US forces overthrow two governments and occupy Afghanistan and Iraq.

Rice, Bush, Rumsfeld, Cheney & Co. have made incessant—and curiously worded—claims to the effect that *if* they had known that terrorists were going to hijack four airplanes on September 11 and fly them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, they would have done something about it. If there is any truth to these claims, it is this: the Bush administration was probably only generally aware that a terrorist attack was coming, and privately welcomed it as a *casus belli*. Its “failure to imagine” was that it did not anticipate the colossal damage that would be inflicted on September 11.

Concluded



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