

What the 9/11 commission report ignores: the CIA-Al Qaeda connection

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The report of the national commission investigating the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, released July 22, is a lengthy document that deserves careful study. It will be the subject of extended analysis on the *World Socialist Web Site*. But it is already possible, on the basis of the commission's composition, the scope of the investigation, and the media coverage surrounding the release of the report, to draw certain definite conclusions.

On the most basic level, the 9/11 report is a whitewash. The 567-page document is filled with criticisms of the Bush and Clinton administrations and the performance of the government agencies responsible for intelligence, national security and emergency response. But the commission attributes all of these failures to incompetence, mismanagement, or "failure of imagination." The fundamental premise of its investigation is that the CIA, the FBI, the US military and the Bush White House all acted in good faith.

The 9/11 report thus excludes, *a priori*, the most important question raised by the events of September 11, 2001: did US government agencies deliberately permit—or actively assist—the carrying out of this terrorist atrocity, in order to provide the Bush administration with the necessary pretext to carry out its program of war in Central Asia and the Middle East and a huge buildup of the forces of state repression at home.

The commission concedes, as is well documented, that the Bush administration came into office focused on overthrowing Saddam Hussein, and that operational planning for a war with Iraq began within days of September 11, despite the absence of any connection between the Baghdad regime and the terrorist attacks, and the longstanding enmity between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda.

The commission heard testimony, from former Clinton and Bush counterterrorism chief Richard Clarke, that the Bush administration stalled on taking action against Al Qaeda during its first eight months in office, despite increasingly strident warnings from Clarke, CIA Director George Tenet, and other intelligence officials that a major Al Qaeda strike against the United States was in the offing. Bush himself received the now-notorious August 6, 2001 Presidential Daily Brief from the CIA, which was entitled, "Bin Laden Determined to Strike Within the United States." But the president told the commission he could not recall taking any action as a result. (He continued his vacation at his Texas ranch for another four weeks).

The 9/11 report lists 10 separate occasions where US government agencies let slip what it called "operational opportunities" to detect and potentially disrupt the September 11 plot. These involved far more than a failure to "connect the dots." Intelligence officials took actions that served to facilitate the 9/11 plot—in effect, running interference for Al Qaeda.

The CIA, for instance, failed to notify domestic police agencies after two known Al Qaeda associates—and future 9/11 hijackers—arrived in Los Angeles. The two men, Khalid al-Midhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi, who were on a CIA watch list, were at one point listed in the San Diego phone book. They traveled freely during the summer of 2001, when the intelligence

suggesting a major Al Qaeda attack reportedly peaked. One of them left the US and reentered without hindrance, while the other renewed his visa.

The commission's report suggests that the two men had confederates in southern California who have never been named, let alone arrested. "We believe it is unlikely," the report states, that al-Midhar and al-Hazmi "would have come to the United States without arranging to receive assistance from one or more individuals informed in advance of their arrival." It is known that at least one FBI informant was involved in providing housing for the two.

The FBI played a key role in burying a series of warnings about the potential danger from Al Qaeda terrorists enrolled at US flight schools, most notably in the case of Zacarias Moussaoui. An admitted Al Qaeda member who was seeking training at a Minnesota flight school, Moussaoui aroused the suspicion of instructors who tipped off the authorities. Moussaoui was detained in August 2001 on immigration charges, and local FBI agents sought authority to investigate—which was denied by FBI higher-ups in Washington, despite the receipt of information from French government sources about Moussaoui's connections with Islamic terrorists.

The commission report criticizes the failure to act on Moussaoui, suggesting that if his arrest had been widely publicized the hijack organizers might have canceled the attack, fearful that it had been compromised. But the panel refrained from naming any of the FBI officials involved. It was "not our purpose to assign blame," Chairman Thomas Kean declared. "There's no single individual who is responsible for our failures."

This refusal to name names and assign responsibility has a definite significance. Named individuals within the intelligence apparatus would be likely to defend themselves by shifting responsibility to those higher up in the chain of command—thus directing the investigation toward the top levels of the national security apparatus and the White House. The 9/11 commission sought at all costs to avoid such an outcome, and to safeguard these key institutions of the state.

While documenting numerous CIA and FBI actions that effectively prevented the exposure of the 9/11 conspiracy, the commission's report never addresses an obvious and crucial issue: were any of the Al Qaeda operatives, especially the ringleaders and organizers of the suicide hijackings, at some point assets or agents of the US intelligence services?

This omission is all the more striking because Al Qaeda has its origins in the US-financed mujaheddin guerrilla war in Afghanistan, where figures such as Osama bin Laden enjoyed American support and received CIA training in weapons, sabotage and bomb-making. Khalid Sheikh Muhammed, the reputed mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, was a longtime associate of Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, a leader of the Afghan Northern Alliance and current ally of the US-backed Afghan president, Hamid Karzai.

The conduct of the 9/11 conspirators strongly suggests that they were under some form of official protection. They made few efforts to conceal

themselves, moving about as they pleased, both within the United States and across its borders. They used telephones and credit cards, both easily traceable. They enrolled openly under their own names at US flight schools, and made repeated transcontinental flights to test out airline security and familiarize themselves with the aircraft interiors.

A political amnesty

The assertion of generalized responsibility—everybody is guilty, so nobody is guilty—has a clear political purpose: it provides a political amnesty for the Bush administration in the run-up to the November 2 election.

Bush fiercely opposed the creation of a commission to investigate 9/11—the bloodiest single attack on American citizens on US soil. This itself indicated that his government had something to hide.

With the conclusion of the nearly two-year investigation, however, the White House and the Bush reelection campaign were breathing sighs of relief, and Bush made a well-publicized appearance with Kean and Democratic Vice Chairman Lee Hamilton to receive the commission's report. Bush declared that the panel had done a "wonderful job" and praised the report's "very solid, sound recommendations about how to move forward."

The US media has embraced the 9/11 report as a definitive, objective and critical account of the events leading up to and including the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, without any suggestion that the report's indictment of a "failure of imagination" represents a cover-up of something far more sinister.

The *Washington Post* gushed, "[T]he 9/11 commission report had the meaty feeling of a history that will endure, thanks to the political pressure, and the subpoena power, that opened up more than 2.5 million pages of information and the testimony of 1,200 interviews. Though quick, the historical judgment seems conclusive: that American leadership failed across the board."

The analysis by the *New York Times* began: "Months of unsparing study by the Sept. 11 commission and the Senate Intelligence Committee have now produced a broad consensus about two colossal intelligence failures: the missed opportunities that left the United States open to attack from Al Qaeda and the misread clues on unconventional weapons that sent American troops to attack Iraq."

To speak of the Bush administration's lies about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction as "misread clues" or the result of an "intelligence failure" is to insult the intelligence of both the American people and world public opinion. Broadly within the US, and almost universally abroad, it is accepted as indisputable fact that the Bush administration deliberately concocted "intelligence" about Iraqi WMDs which it knew to be false, and made extreme allegations without any sound evidence, in order to portray an unprovoked invasion as a matter of "self-defense." Even sections of the American bourgeois media have suggested as much.

The 9/11 commission report itself documents the fact that leading personnel in the Bush administration were pushing, within hours of the attacks on New York and Washington, for a war to remove the regime of Saddam Hussein. It notes, for example, that Bush ordered the Pentagon on September 17, 2001 to be ready to occupy the Iraqi oil fields if Baghdad "acted against US interests."

If the US government was prepared to use deliberate lies to provide a pretext for a war in which tens of thousands have lost their lives, why should anyone believe it is incapable of similar methods in relation to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington?

It is highly plausible—and on the basis of the available evidence, more

likely than not—that US intelligence agencies had identified the main leaders of the 9/11 hijackings long before they boarded the doomed flights. Mohammed Atta, for instance, the supposed ringleader, was under US surveillance in Europe nearly two years before September 11, according to reports in the German media. Yet this suspected terrorist was allowed to enter and leave the US, enroll in a US flight school, and board transcontinental passenger flights repeatedly.

Laying the basis for a police state

Just as significant as its whitewash of the US government role in September 11 are the 9/11 commission's recommendations, which boil down to two injunctions: more aggressive military action overseas against supposed terrorist threats, and an enormous strengthening of the repressive powers of the federal government at home.

The panel's major criticism of the Clinton administration is that it was too cautious in its military strikes against Osama bin Laden and other Al Qaeda targets in 1998-99, and that it failed to respond to the October 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen.

In regard to the Bush administration, the commission hailed the invasion of Afghanistan and the overthrow of the Taliban regime, but was conspicuously silent on the merits of the war with Iraq, which many of the commissioners clearly considered to be a diversion. Whatever its reservations about the war, however, the commission—echoing the campaign of Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry—observed that a US victory over the Iraqi insurgency was vitally necessary to prevent the emergence of a "failed state" that would play host to terrorist groups.

The 9/11 report strongly suggests a connection between Al Qaeda and Iran, providing political support for eventual military action against the second of the three countries included in Bush's notorious "axis of evil." Extreme-right warmongers like columnist Charles Krauthammer and the editorialists at the *Wall Street Journal*, who previously had been highly critical of the 9/11 commission, hailed this aspect of its report. Krauthammer noted in a July 23 column in the *Washington Post* that, having conquered Iraq and placed 140,000 US troops on Iran's borders, the Bush administration was well positioned for another preemptive war.

The bulk of the commission's 41 recommendations concern the strengthening and consolidation of the US intelligence apparatus, including the establishment of an intelligence czar with authority over the CIA, the Defense intelligence agencies and the FBI's counter-terrorism unit, giving a single individual unprecedented police and spying powers. This would put an end to longstanding prohibitions against CIA and military spying and other operations within the borders of the United States, and open the way to systematic surveillance and repression against all domestic opponents of the US government.

The panel also called for encoding biometric information in passports and standardizing driver's license requirements across the 50 states. These are steps toward the establishment of a national identity card and a centralized federal data bank in which key personal information on every US resident would be held.

The Democratic Party and its presidential nominee, John Kerry, took the lead in hailing the 9/11 panel's work. Kerry reiterated his longstanding support for a national intelligence director, saying, "That's overdue, and when I'm president, it's going to happen."

This bipartisan support for sweeping new attacks on democratic rights underscores the reality of the 2004 presidential campaign: both of the major bourgeois parties agree on the war in Iraq and the open-ended "war on terror;" they agree on stepped-up attacks on democratic rights at home; and they agree on defending the interests of the super-rich one percent that

dominates American society. They differ only on the best methods to accomplish these goals.



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