

Bush administration tries to suppress evidence

US air traffic authority had multiple Bin Laden hijack warnings before 9/11

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The Federal Aviation Administration had dozens of intelligence reports warning of possible airline hijackings and suicide operations by Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden during the months leading up to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, according to a report from the 9/11 commission that the Bush administration has sought to keep secret.

The *New York Times* published the first report of the 9/11 commission document yesterday, noting that the commission had approved the finding last summer, before it disbanded in August. The Bush administration blocked release of the document, citing national security concerns, for more than five months. This served the political purposes of the Bush reelection campaign, ensuring that the document demonstrating the administration's gross negligence—or worse—would not be released before the 2004 presidential vote.

According to former officials of the 9/11 commission who spoke with the *Times*, the Bush administration finally approved both the classified report on the FAA's performance before September 11 and a declassified 120-page version two weeks ago, delivering them to the National Archives. The declassified version is heavily "redacted," with significant passages entirely deleted. Nonetheless, the *Times* reported, "the declassified version provides the firmest evidence to date about the warnings that aviation officials received concerning the threat of an attack on airliners and the failure to take steps to deter it."

The declassified report says that the FAA officials were "lulled into a false sense of security," and that "intelligence that indicated a real and growing threat leading up to 9/11 did not stimulate significant increases in security procedures," according to the *Times*.

Altogether, FAA officials received 52 intelligence reports from their own security branch that named bin Laden or Al Qaeda, during the five months before September 11. Either the terrorist leader or his network was mentioned in half of all the intelligence summaries circulated through the agency leadership. Five of these reports discussed Al Qaeda's ability to conduct hijackings, while two mentioned suicide operations.

It has been previously reported that the FAA issued general warnings to the airline industry in the spring and summer of

2001 about the possibility of hijackings by Islamic terrorists. One such warning, cited in the 9/11 commission document, cautions US airport administrators that while the FAA still regarded an overseas hijacking as the greater likelihood, if "the intent of the hijacker is not to exchange hostages for prisoners, but to commit suicide in a spectacular explosion, a domestic hijacking would probably be preferable." This quote refutes once again the statements by Bush administration representatives like Condoleezza Rice, who notoriously declared, in 2002, that no one could have imagined "that they would try to use an airplane as a missile."

According to the 9/11 commission document, the FAA "had indeed considered the possibility that terrorists would hijack a plane and use it as a weapon." In 2001 the FAA distributed a CD-ROM presentation to airlines and airports that cited the possibility of a suicide hijacking, the report said, and the FAA conducted briefings during the summer for security officials from 19 of the busiest US airports, specifically warning of the threat posed by bin Laden and his organization. This did not stop the hijackers from successfully boarding airplanes at Boston, Newark and Dulles Airports only months later.

A number of issues are raised by the *Times* report on the 9/11 commission document. It vindicates the testimony of Mary Schiavo, former inspector general of the Department of Transportation, who has been a public critic of the FAA and an ally of the September 11 families, who sought to force an independent investigation of the role of the federal government before and during the attacks.

Schiavo said in her statement to the commission, "The notion that these hijackings and terrorism were an unforeseen and unforeseeable risk is an airline and FAA public-relations management myth." She was opposed by Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta—the only Democrat in the Bush cabinet—who told the commission, "I don't think we ever thought of an aircraft being used as a missile."

The document also confirms the testimony of former Bush counterterrorism adviser Richard Clarke, who charged that the administration had been grossly negligent about security preparations in relation to US air traffic in the period leading up

to September 11. On July 5, 2001, Clarke, Rice, and Andrew Card, White House chief of staff, convened a meeting of domestic agency heads to discuss urgent counterterrorism preparations.

An e-mail message the following day from Clarke to Rice noted that the meeting had agreed on developing “detailed response plans in the event of three to five simultaneous attacks.” Yet neither FAA Administrator Jane Garvey nor Transportation Secretary Mineta were informed of the decisions of this meeting or tasked to carry them out.

The Bush administration initially opposed the formation of the 9/11 commission, only accepting it when the families began a public campaign against the refusal to hold an investigation more than a year after the bloodiest single event on US soil since the Civil War. Even after the formation of the commission, headed by trusted figures in the political establishment, the FAA in particular refused to cooperate. The agency had to be subpoenaed by the commission and directed by the White House to comply before it would deliver records on the responses of air traffic controllers and the radar record of the movement of air defense fighters on September 11.

The latest revelation about the circumstances leading up to the 9/11 attack also suggests the following obvious question, although the *Times* does not ask it: If the FAA had 52 warnings, how many did the CIA, FBI, NSA and Pentagon have?

FAA security officials do not operate an independent intelligence network—they have no agents on the ground in Afghanistan or anywhere else. Yet simply on the information generally available to the security community in the spring and summer of 2001, they were able to draw up fairly specific warnings, even suggesting the actual *modus operandi* of the 9/11 attacks, hijackings whose goal was to “commit suicide in a spectacular explosion.”

The *Times* report thus poses the issue—avoided like the plague by the corporate-controlled media—that US government agencies and high-level officials of the Bush administration likely had advance knowledge of the September 11 attacks. The least likely scenario, given all that is now known, is the official story that the suicide hijackings came “out of the clear blue sky,” that they could not have been anticipated or prevented, if there had been the will to do so.

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The disarray in relation to airline and airport security, the inexplicable decision to permit known Al Qaeda terrorists to enter and re-enter the United States, the refusal to pursue warnings from lower-level FBI agents about Islamic fundamentalists seeking pilot training in Minnesota and Arizona, the complacent response to the notorious August 6, 2001 CIA briefing in which Bush was handed a document entitled “Bin Laden Determined to Strike Within US”—all this has no legitimate explanation.

It is worth recalling once again the extraordinary exchange

during a hearing of the 9/11 commission between commissioner Bob Kerrey—a right-wing former Democratic senator and supporter of the war in Iraq—and former CIA and State Department counterterrorism official Cofer Black.

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 you can’t, fine. I mean, I’m not sure I could.

Kerrey uses the term “stacked arms,” referring to a deliberate refusal to fight. Far more plausible than the administration’s claim that the attacks came as a complete surprise is that some form of stand-down was imposed on the intelligence and security services, knowing that a terrorist attack within the United States was imminent. The Bush White House wanted to use such an incident as the pretext for the long-planned campaign of military action in the Middle East that has unfolded over the last four years. (It is, of course, not necessary to suppose that those who permitted the attack knew exactly what its scale would be, nor the colossal cost in human lives.)

The Bush administration’s conduct in response to this latest 9/11 finding is a further confirmation of this theory. The White House deliberately stalled for months in allowing the declassification of the report on the FAA’s performance, pushing it past the election in which Bush sought to focus on his supposedly vigorous conduct of the “war on terror.”

Once the election was safely past, the White House had the report quietly delivered to the National Archives for burial, where it was uncovered by the *Times*—apparently thanks to a tip from an angry member of the 9/11 commission. This is more than just electoral skullduggery, which would be reprehensible enough. It is the hallmark of a government that has many crimes to hide, not least of them its role in the September 11 terrorist attacks.



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