

Caught in their own lies

9/11 Commission admits excluding intelligence on lead hijacker, Atta

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A spokesman for the September 11 commission acknowledged on Wednesday that members of its staff met with a uniformed military officer on July 12, 2004 and that the officer informed them that a military intelligence group had, as early as the summer of 2000, identified Mohammad Atta as part of an Al Qaeda cell operating in the US. Atta is thought to have been the lead hijacker in the September 11 attacks.

This admission flatly contradicts statements made earlier this week by 9/11 Chairman Thomas Kean and Co-Chairman Lee Hamilton that the commission staff was never told of the military intelligence on Atta.

According to an August 11 *New York Times* article, the officer warned the commission staff “that the [commission’s] account would be incomplete” without reference to the military intelligence group and its findings.

In the commission’s report, issued on July 22, 2004—10 days after the meeting where staff members were briefed on the Atta intelligence—no mention was made of the information gathered by Able Danger, the name of the military intelligence group.

According to Republican Congressman Curt Weldon and an unidentified former military intelligence officer, in the summer of 2000 members of Able Danger were prevented by the Pentagon’s Special Operations Command from relaying to the FBI the information they had gathered on Atta and three others future hijackers. At the time, Atta and the others were in the United States and were taking flying lessons.

The commission spokesman, Al Felzenberg, acknowledged that the July 12, 2004 briefing had taken place only after Weldon sent the commission members a letter indicating he had information about the meeting. Weldon had previously revealed that the commission staff met with officers connected to Able Danger in October 2003.

On Tuesday, Kean and Hamilton admitted that commission staff members had been told of Able Danger at the 2003 meeting, but said the staff did not recall being told the names of the individuals, including Atta, whom the military group had identified in 2000. Now, only one day later, Felzenberg has been forced to backtrack, saying that the staff was told in July 2004 of the pre-9/11 military intelligence on Atta, but that the commission decided not to include this information in its final report.

Weldon’s letter to Kean, Hamilton and the eight other

commission members expressed “extreme disappointment in the recent, and false, claim of the 9-11 Commission staff that the Commission was never given access to any information on Able Danger. The 9-11 Commission staff received not one but two briefings on Able Danger from former team members, yet did not pursue the matter. Furthermore, commissioners never returned calls from a defense intelligence official that had made contact with them to discuss this issue as a follow on to a previous meeting.”

Weldon is a right-wing congressman who has become a champion of “data mining” operations such as Able Danger, and who advocates a greater expansion of the powers of the intelligence apparatus. Nevertheless, the information regarding Able Danger supports previous evidence that US intelligence and security agencies were following the September 11 hijackers, but did nothing to disrupt their operations.

While admitting Wednesday that the commission staff was informed of the Atta intelligence, commission spokesman Felzenberg attempted to belittle its significance and cast the commission’s decision to exclude any mention of it as a minor and routine matter bound up with the pressures of preparing to publish the commission’s findings.

The truth is precisely the opposite. The fact that military intelligence had identified Atta and three other future hijackers as part of an Al Qaeda cell in the US more than a year before the 9/11 attacks, and the four were still able to come and go as they pleased, in some cases leaving and reentering the US, and plan and carry out the biggest terrorist attack in US history without any hindrance or interference from the FBI, the CIA or any other government agency, is a revelation of the most explosive character with the most far-reaching implications.

It fatally undermines the central contention of the 9/11 commission and every other official whitewash of the events surrounding the terror attacks on New York and Washington: that the “intelligence failure” that allowed the attacks to occur was the result, at worst, of incompetence and institutional roadblocks that prevented the agencies from “connecting the dots.”

Instead, this latest revelation supports a whole series of previous revelations suggesting that one or more intelligence or security agencies and high government and/or military officials acted to shield the hijackers and allow them to carry out a terrorist attack

on US soil. For what purpose? Precisely to create the conditions for shifting and manipulating public opinion to accept a massive escalation of US militarism and unprecedented attacks on democratic rights.

It is the immense importance of the Able Danger information, and its highly dangerous political implications for the Bush administration and the entire American political establishment, that explain the commission's decision to exclude any mention of it.

The rationale given by the commission for omitting the information on Atta and Able Danger in its final report is just as absurd as the previous claims that the staff was never given Atta's name. Referring to the military officer who met with the commission staff in July 2004, Felzenberg told the *New York Times*, "He wasn't brushed off. The information that he provided us did not mesh with other conclusions that we were drawing."

According to the *Times*, "Mr. Felzenberg said staff investigators had become wary of the officer because he argued that Able Danger had identified Mr. Atta, an Egyptian, as having been in the United States in late 1999 or early 2000. The investigators knew this was impossible, Mr. Felzenberg said, since travel records confirmed that he had not entered the United States until June 2000."

Russell Caso, the chief of staff for Rep. Weldon, effectively answered this red herring advanced by Felzenberg. According to the *Times*, Caso said that "while the dates may not have meshed" with the commission's information, the central element of the officer's claim was that "Mohammed Atta was identified as being tied to Al Qaeda and a Brooklyn cell more than a year before the Sept. 11 attacks, and that should have warranted further investigation by the commission." Caso added, "If Mohammed Atta was identified by the Able Danger project, why didn't the Department of Defense provide that information to the FBI?"

Moreover, even if the 9/11 commission had questions about the credibility of the Able Danger information, that does not justify or explain away its failure to take note of the briefings given it on the issue. The commission's 585-page report and thousands of supplementary pages of staff reports, interviews, etc. contain many references to claims, theories and alleged facts relating to the 9/11 attacks which the commission concluded were not credible or could not be confirmed. Why should such an obviously important fact as previous military intelligence on Atta and three other hijackers find no mention in any of these documents, even if accompanied by an explanation from the commission debunking or questioning its reliability?

One paragraph near the end of the *Times* article on Thursday notes the following: "Mr. Felzenberg confirmed an account by Mr. Weldon's staff that the briefing [with the uniformed military officer on July 12, 2004], at the commission's offices in Washington, had been conducted by Dietrich L. Snell, one of the panel's lead investigators, and had been attended by a Pentagon employee acting as an observer for the Defense Department; over the commission's protests, the Bush administration had insisted that an administration 'minder' attend all the panel's major interviews with executive branch employees."

There are several points to be made about this paragraph. First, it

exposes as a fraud the supposed "independence" of the 9/11 commission. No genuinely independent commission would allow the government to monitor its interviews with key sources and witnesses. It also highlights the basic hostility of the Bush administration toward the investigation and its fear of what might be revealed. What did the White House have to hide?

Second, it indicates that the administration considered the July 12, 2004 interview with the military officer to be a "major interview," significant enough to send an observer to monitor it.

Third, the fact that an observer from the Defense Department attended the interview contradicts a statement from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld on Tuesday, when he said, of Able Danger, "I've never heard of it until this morning."

Finally, the fact that the interview was headed by Snell is revealing. Snell was the lead prosecutor in the trial of Abdul Hakim Murad, who was convicted in 1996 for his role in the so-called "Bojinka plot."

Murad allegedly conspired with Ramzi Yousef, the individual convicted of the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, and Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, who is said to have been involved in the planning of the September 11 attacks, to explode 11 planes over the Pacific Ocean. Murad offered to cooperate with the prosecution in return for a lighter sentence, but was turned down. Murad had confessed to Philippine investigators in 1995 that one version of the plot involved flying the planes into buildings, including the World Trade Center, though the main target was the CIA headquarters.

The Bojinka plot is one of the main pieces of evidence indicating that American police and intelligence agencies were well aware of plots to fly planes into buildings, contrary to statements made by Bush administration officials following the attacks of September 11.

To date, many of those involved in the Able Danger revelations have refused to comment, including Snell, the Pentagon and the Special Operations Command. Philip Zelikow, currently a senior advisor to secretary of state Condoleezza Rice, and the lead commission staff member at the October 2003 meeting with Able Danger members, has also refused to comment.

The American media continues to bury the revelations. After its front-page article breaking the story on Tuesday, the *New York Times* has placed its follow-up articles on its inside pages. Wednesday's article was on page 13 and Thursday's on page 14. Other newspapers have hardly mentioned it. The only article to appear so far in the *Washington Post* has been a five paragraph Associated Press story on Wednesday. The broadcast network evening news programs continue to ignore the story.



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