

9/11 commission told of Atta cover-up

Intelligence officer goes public in Able Danger exposé

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A longtime Army intelligence officer went public with his allegations about a cover-up in the 9/11 investigation, giving an on-the-record interview Monday night to the *New York Times* and Fox News, and then further interviews Tuesday to other news outlets.

Lt. Col. Anthony Shaffer, 42, confirmed that he had been a source for previous reports in the *Times* and the *Norristown Times-Herald*, a Philadelphia-area newspaper, about a secret data-mining operation known as Able Danger, which he said had identified Mohammed Atta and three other 9/11 suicide hijackers in 2000, more than a year before the terrorist attacks.

Shaffer said that his unit had contacted the FBI repeatedly during 2000 to warn that a US-based terrorist cell was at work, but three times was forced to cancel meetings to brief the FBI at the instruction of the Strategic Operations Command (SOCOM), the Pentagon unit in charge of all counter-terrorism work.

He charged that the information withheld might have made it possible to arrest Atta and other terrorists before they could carry out their plans. "I was at the point of near insubordination over the fact that this was something important, that this was something that should have been pursued," Shaffer told the *Times*. He said the Pentagon officials did not want the information circulated because it would reveal the existence of the secret military intelligence project and lead to criticism that the military was collecting information on the American people.

By his account, Shaffer was not directly involved in data collection or analysis, but served as liaison between Able Danger and the Defense Intelligence Agency, the largest unit of the vast US intelligence apparatus. Defense Department officials did not dispute his version of events, but declined any further comment.

Shaffer said he had decided to allow his name to be made public, in violation of normal security procedures, in response to the statement issued last week by Thomas Kean and Lee Hamilton, the chairman and vice-chairman of the 9/11 commission. They declared that the panel knew of Able Danger but had never been informed that the project had identified Atta or others of the hijackers in advance of 9/11.

The 9/11 commission report flatly declared that no US intelligence agency had identified Atta before September 11. Colonel Shaffer directly rebuts this claim, telling the media that he personally provided information about Able Danger, including its identification of Atta, at an October 2003 meeting in Afghanistan, where he was then stationed as a Special Forces officer. Several members of the commission staff were present and received the

information, including staff director Philip Zelikow, now the senior counselor to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Shaffer said a follow-up investigation was in order to determine what happened to the information on Able Danger he provided to the commission staff. "I'm told confidently by the person who did move the material over that the 9/11 commission received two briefcase-sized containers of documents," he told Fox News. "I can tell you for a fact, that would not be one-twentieth of the information Able Danger consisted of during the time we spent."

The 9/11 commission did not even mention Able Danger in its final report because the program "did not turn out to be historically significant," Kean and Hamilton said. Shaffer pointed to the absurdity of this claim, since Able Danger was a major initiative by the military to target Al Qaeda, and the 9/11 commission was charged with investigating all such activities and making an assessment of their effectiveness.

"This was a good news story because, before 9/11, you had an element of the military—our unit—which was actually out looking for Al Qaeda," he said. "I can't believe the 9/11 commission would somehow believe that the historical value was not relevant."

The statements by Shaffer shatter the official story of the September 11 attacks, as devised by the Bush administration, endorsed by the entire Washington political establishment, and parroted obediently by the media. By the official account, Islamic fundamentalist hijackers entered and re-entered the United States repeatedly over a two-year period, made substantial preparations for the terrorist attacks, including obtaining pilot training on US soil, organized themselves to hijack four commercial airliners simultaneously and crash them into the World Trade Center and Pentagon, all without any US police or intelligence agency being aware of their activities.

It is now clear that those who have rejected this account—including the *World Socialist Web Site*—have been proven right. The future hijackers were detected by US government agencies, including the CIA and military intelligence, yet nothing was done either to arrest them or disrupt their operations.

There is only one politically serious explanation of this now-indisputable fact: powerful forces within the US military/intelligence complex wanted a terrorist incident on US soil in order to create the needed shift in public opinion required to embark on a long-planned campaign of military intervention in Central Asia and the Middle East. Whether or not they knew the

scale of the impending attacks and what the precise targets would be, they acted in such a way as to block the arrest of known terrorist operatives and allow them to carry out their plot.

Should this understanding begin to penetrate broad layers of working people in the United States, there will be an enormous public reaction against the intelligence services and the entire political establishment, which is complicit, in one way or another, in the cover-up and political exploitation of the events of 9/11. That explains the extraordinary timidity of the media coverage. Both right and “left” in the official political spectrum are handling the Able Danger revelation like a hand grenade that could go off in their faces.

Liberal publications like the *New York Times*, despite first bringing the story to wide public attention, have sought subsequently to downplay the revelations. The interview with Lt. Col. Shaffer, who is essentially abandoning his intelligence career by going public, is the kind of “scoop” that would normally rate banner front-page headlines. Instead, it was on the bottom of an inside page, and a follow-up story the next day was buried even deeper, on page 20.

The representatives of the extreme right—Fox, the Murdoch press, Rush Limbaugh and other right-wing talk radio hosts, and an array of bloggers—have made more noise about Able Danger, but only in the service of a political diversion.

They have sought to use Shaffer’s account to indict the Clinton administration and shift responsibility for the 9/11 security failure from Bush to his Democratic predecessor. According to them, the decision by the Pentagon not to supply information on the Al Qaeda cell to the FBI, taken in mid-2000 when Clinton was still in the White House, is the product of the so-called “wall” between intelligence operations and law enforcement allegedly set up in the mid-1990s by Deputy Attorney General Jamie Gorelick—herself later a Democratic member of the 9/11 commission.

This allegation is entirely groundless. The “wall” never existed in reality, as testimony before the 9/11 commission demonstrated. Information-sharing between intelligence and law enforcement units was routine and continual, except when “black” operations had to be kept secret to preserve official deniability. If lawyers did cite the “wall” in relation to Able Danger, this was likely a pretext for a cover-up ordered for entirely different reasons.

To put it mildly, the picture presented of military and intelligence officials hamstrung by lawyers and legalisms is not credible. The \$40 billion US intelligence apparatus is the most ruthless and aggressive in the world, engaged in illegal surveillance, kidnapping, torture and murder. If American intelligence kept quiet about Mohammed Atta, it was because higher interests of state required it, not because of any scruples about civil liberties.

The focus on Gorelick and the “wall” serves three obvious political ends. It reinforces the right-wing campaign to eliminate all legal restraints, no matter how ineffective, on the operations of US intelligence agencies (that appears to be the principal motive of Republican Congressman Curt Weldon, who arranged Shaffer’s initial meetings with the press). It appeals to the anti-Clinton mania of the Republican Party’s far-right base. And it diverts attention from the responsibility of the Bush administration for

both the 9/11 security failure and the subsequent cover-up.

It is particularly noteworthy that in the large volume of commentary on Able Danger that has appeared in the ultra-right media, the name Philip Zelikow is nearly absent. (Fox News, for instance, mentions Zelikow exactly once in its coverage.) Yet Zelikow played the principal role in suppressing the revelations about Able Danger and Mohammed Atta. He was present at the briefing by Shaffer in Afghanistan in October 2003, but according to those commission members who have spoken publicly, never told them that the military unit had identified Atta more than a year before the 9/11 attacks.

The reason for silence on Zelikow’s role is not hard to guess: he is now a high-ranking official in the Bush administration, serving as senior counselor to Secretary of State Rice, a longtime friend and associate with whom he co-authored a book. If one recalls the shadow-boxing in the spring of 2004 over whether the Bush administration would permit Rice to testify before the 9/11 commission, it is now clear that the White House agreed to cooperate only because it was assured that in Zelikow, the most important behind-the-scenes operative of the commission, it had a trusted agent in place to manipulate the investigation and prevent any too-damaging exposures.

Shaffer was adamant that he personally informed Zelikow and mentioned Atta by name. “I kept my talking points,” from the meeting, he said in one press interview, “and I’m confident about what I said.” The commission staff told him they would follow up their discussion, and the next month they requested documents from the Pentagon on Able Danger, but he was never interviewed again. “They didn’t follow up jack,” he said. “That’s when the investigative rigor wasn’t followed.”

That a serving intelligence officer of Shaffer’s rank should come forward publicly is a sign of intense and deepening crisis within the US intelligence apparatus. There is evidently considerable bitterness about the aftermath of the 9/11 debacle. Shaffer noted, “Guys that had a role in the failure got promoted.” He added, “They have not changed the way they do business.”

Within military/intelligence circles, the knives are out. Shaffer said that some Pentagon officials are “trying to go dirty on me right now” for what he told the 9/11 commission and his latest public revelations.

Shaffer’s revelations are only the tip of the iceberg. The 9/11 commission report is now discredited as a bipartisan cover-up, in which Democrats and Republicans joined forces to protect the key institutions of the state. The accounts of 9/11 in the corporate-controlled mass media are little more than successive versions of government press releases, rewritten without even serious effort to maintain a consistent cover-up. The truth about 9/11 requires a genuinely independent investigation which will focus on the role of the US government and the US intelligence apparatus in allowing the attacks to occur.



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