

Why were the terrorists shielded?

US military intelligence identified four 9/11 hijackers in 2000

Patrick Martin
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A top-secret military intelligence unit identified four of the 9/11 suicide hijackers as Al Qaeda operatives, including two of the pilots, more than a year before the September 11 terrorist attacks, a front-page report in the *New York Times* revealed Tuesday.

The article by reporter Douglas Jehl, cites Republican Congressman Curt Weldon of Pennsylvania and an unnamed former military intelligence officer as its sources.

Jehl's report confirms what has been widely reported overseas but long covered up by the Bush administration and the American media: Mohammed Atta, believed to be the operational leader of the 9/11 attacks, was under US intelligence surveillance even before he came to the United States in 2000. How Atta was able to enter and re-enter the country on multiple occasions over the next year, enroll in flight school, and use credit cards and bank accounts in his real name, despite being a known Al Qaeda operative, has never been explained.

Weldon first revealed the existence of the military intelligence program, code-named Able Danger, in an interview with the *Norristown Times-Herald*, a newspaper in his suburban Philadelphia district, on June 19. He followed this up with a little-noticed speech to the House of Representatives on June 27. It was not until the issue was raised by *Government Security News*, a publication that specializes in reporting on the US homeland security apparatus, that it was taken up by the major media.

The *Times* interviewed the former military intelligence agent at Weldon's congressional office. By his account, Able Danger was set up in 1999 to conduct data mining from publicly accessible databases, cross-referencing with information from US agencies like the Immigration and Naturalization Service and with classified intelligence information. This technique pinpointed the names of Mohammed Atta and Marwan al-Shehhi, the pilots who flew hijacked jets into the north and south towers of the World Trade Center, as well as Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Midhdar, two of the five men who hijacked an American Airlines jet and crashed it into the Pentagon.

Had this information been widely circulated in 2000 or 2001, the September 11 attacks, which took the lives of 3,000 innocent people, could have been prevented. But the *Times* article states: "In the summer of 2000, the military team, known as Able Danger, prepared a chart that included visa photographs of the four men and recommended to the military's Special Operations Command that the information be shared with the Federal Bureau of Investigation... The recommendation was rejected and the information was not shared..."

According to the account in *Government Security News*, the former military intelligence agent remarked bitterly: "We were directed to take those 3M yellow stickers and place them over the faces of Atta and the other terrorists and pretend they didn't exist."

White House discussions

Remarkably, Weldon reveals that he discussed Able Danger with top White House officials, including then-deputy national security adviser Stephen Hadley, in September or October 2001, just after the 9/11 attacks. The White House was thus fully aware that the US military had identified Mohammed Atta and Marwan al-Shehhi well before September 11, but it suppressed that information from all subsequent investigations, including the 9/11 commission.

The 9/11 commission staff nonetheless learned of the existence of Able Danger in October 2003, when several former military intelligence officers spoke to the staff, including executive director Philip Zelikow. According to the former military intelligence officer interviewed by the *Times*, they specifically mentioned Mohammed Atta by name in these discussions.

The former spokesman for the 9/11 commission, Al Felzenberg, in an interview with the *Times*, confirmed that the discussions about Able Danger had taken place, but claimed Atta's name had not come up and the staff had not believed the report to be significant.

The June 19 *Norristown Times-Herald* article, however, gives the following account:

"Weldon said he was told specifically by commission members Tim Roemer, a former Democratic congressman from Indiana, and John Lehman, a former secretary of the Navy, that they had never been briefed on the Able Danger unit within Special Ops or on the unit's evidence of a terrorist cell..."

The former military intelligence officer told the *Times-Herald*, "I personally talked with Zelikow about this. For whatever bizarre reasons, he didn't pass on the information."

There is no mention of Able Danger in the final commission report, and no hint that any US government agency had linked Atta to Al Qaeda before the September 11 attacks.

This demonstrates that the 9/11 commission was a fraud and a whitewash. Rather than uncover the real story of the terrorist attacks, the commission conducted a sophisticated cover-up of the real relations between US government agencies and the terrorists who killed 3,000 people. Meanwhile, Zelikow, the chief organizer of the 9/11 panel, has been rewarded for his services to the Bush administration and to the military/intelligence apparatus with an appointment as senior counselor to US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, a longtime friend and associate.

Nor is he an exception. Stephen Hadley, who was informed of Able Danger nearly four years ago, was given the top job at the National Security Council. The military officer who headed the Special Operations Command at the time the Able Danger information was suppressed, General Peter Schoomaker, is now the Army chief of staff.

It is clear from these promotions—all appointments requiring presidential approval—that the decision to conceal the identity of Atta and his three co-conspirators was endorsed at the highest levels of the American state. No one suffered from a decision that had the effect of giving a free hand to plan, prepare and carry out the worst terrorist attacks in US history.

The reasons given in the *Times* article for the suppression of the information generated by Able Danger do not hold water. There were allegedly concerns that information gathered by military intelligence could not be shared with law enforcement agencies because of legal prohibitions. “Under American law, United States citizens and green-card holders may not be singled out in intelligence-collection operations by the military or intelligence agencies,” Jehl writes, admitting, however, “That protection does not extend to visa holders” like Atta and his colleagues.

It is simply not credible, even in the pre-9/11 climate, that US intelligence agencies—steeped in the most sordid methods of work, from slander and blackmail to torture and murder—were somehow paralyzed by a too-delicate concern for the democratic rights of suspected Al Qaeda operatives. Such arguments are presented not as serious explanations, but to advance a definite political agenda: the removal of all restraints on the operations of the intelligence apparatus, both at home and abroad.

Weldon shares this agenda. He is a conservative Republican, vice chairman of both the House Armed Services Committee and the House Homeland Security Committee. He is an advocate of a much more intensive data-mining operation, such as the Total Information Awareness program briefly sponsored by the Pentagon after 9/11, then abandoned in the face of widespread criticism of its Orwellian implications.

The Pennsylvania congressman has clashed repeatedly with the US intelligence establishment, particularly over his efforts to hype the alleged threat of an Iranian-sponsored nuclear terrorist attack within the United States. He is the author of a recently published book whose title reveals his viewpoint: *Countdown to Terror: The Top-Secret Information that Could Prevent the Next Terrorist Attack on America and How the C.I.A. Has Ignored It*.

Whatever Weldon’s idiosyncrasies, however, the conflict between the warmongering congressman and the CIA has produced a major breach in the official wall of silence about the relationship between the US intelligence agencies and the 9/11 hijackers. Until now, the Bush administration, the CIA, and the various official investigations, including the 9/11 commission, all claimed that only two of the hijackers, al-Midhdar and al-Hazmi, had come to the attention of US intelligence prior to the terrorist attacks.

After lengthy footdragging, the CIA was compelled to admit that though it had linked these two with Al Qaeda in January-March 2000, it failed to notify the FBI until August 27, 2001—two weeks before they took part in the September 11 suicide hijackings. The two men were able to enter the United States and live in the San Diego area for months, with one of them listed in the local phone book, although both were on a CIA watch list. At one point, the two rented a room from an FBI informer who was debriefed in his living room by an FBI agent whom he politely introduced to his two terrorist tenants.

The *Times* article attempts to bolster this crumbling official cover story, declaring that Weldon’s account “is the first assertion that Mr. Atta, an Egyptian who became the lead hijacker in the plot, was identified by any American government agency as a potential threat before the Sept. 11 attacks.”

This claim is flatly untrue. There have been repeated accounts, particularly in the German media, about Atta being under surveillance by the CIA while he was living in Hamburg, and about this surveillance continuing after he shifted his activities to the United States in the summer of 2000, apparently by the Israeli secret service Mossad (the CIA not being permitted to conduct its own surveillance operations on US soil).

Reports were carried by the television network ARD, the magazine *Der*

Spiegel, and major daily newspapers like the *Berliner Zeitung* and *Die Zeit*. Their accounts have the CIA beginning surveillance of Atta in Hamburg in January 2000, following him during a trip to Frankfurt, where he purchased chemicals that could be used in making explosives, right up to the point where he visited the US embassy in Berlin, on May 18, 2000, and obtained a US entry visa. Atta flew to the United States from Prague, capital of the neighboring Czech Republic, on June 3, 2000.

Both *Der Spiegel* and *Die Zeit* reported that Mossad kept Atta under surveillance while he was attending flight school in south Florida in 2000 and early 2001. At one point, after a trip to Europe, Atta was stopped by a customs officer when re-entering the US at Miami International Airport, because his visa was invalid. Nonetheless, he was allowed in.

Finally, on August 23, 2001, Mossad presented to the CIA a list of 19 named Islamic fundamentalist terrorists living in the United States and said to be planning an imminent attack. Aside from the chilling coincidence in the number—19 Islamic fundamentalists participated in the September 11 attacks—the Israeli list actually named four of the future hijackers, including Mohammed Atta.

The *Times* report confirms once again the analysis the WSWS made within four months of 9/11 (“Was the US government alerted to September 11 attack?”). We charged then, and reiterate now, that the least plausible explanation of the September 11 tragedy is the official version: that terrorists entered the United States, obtained training at US flight schools and organized the simultaneous hijacking of four airliners, without any agency of the American government having the slightest idea what they were doing.

This new revelation only reinforces the suspicion that the tragedy of 9/11 was not the result of an “intelligence failure” or an inability to “connect the dots.” High-level officials in the state apparatus took affirmative action to protect the Al Qaeda operatives and allow them to prepare a terrorist attack. Whether they knew the full extent of what Atta and his confederates would do on September 11 can be debated, but there is no question that a terrorist outrage within the United States served the political purposes of the Bush administration.

The new right-wing government desperately needed a Pearl Harbor-style event to shift public opinion and create the conditions where it could press forward with plans—already well prepared before 9/11—for military interventions in the Middle East and Central Asia, the two largest sources for oil and gas. Bush, Cheney & Co. ruthlessly exploited 9/11 as an all-purpose justification for right-wing policies at home as well, from tax cuts for the super-rich to unprecedented attacks on democratic rights.

In response to the *Times* report, it is necessary to demand answers to basic questions about September 11:

- * Why were known Al Qaeda members permitted to enter the United States and carry out their plans?
- * Who made the decisions which facilitated the work of the terrorists and why have they not been held responsible?
- * Why have the facts about September 11 been covered up, not only by the White House and the intelligence agencies, but by congressional Democrats and the American media?



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