

# The case of Curt Weldon: Republican congressman targeted after criticizing 9/11 cover-up

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**23 October 2006**

A series of FBI raids only three weeks before the November 7 election have dealt a blow to the political fortunes of Republican Congressman Curt Weldon. Federal agents raided the homes of Weldon's daughter and a close political supporter on October 16, allegedly looking for evidence of an influence-peddling scheme involving the congressman and a Russian oil company.

It is impossible to determine whether there is substance to the charge that the ten-term Republican from the Philadelphia suburbs engaged in corrupt relations with the Itera International Energy Corp., a huge oil and gas supplier which hired Solutions North America, a lobbying firm headed by Karen Weldon and Charles Sexton Jr., a long-time Weldon crony. No one who follows the activities of the US Congress, however, would be shocked if the accusation turned out to be true.

Itera signed a \$500,000 contract with Solutions North America in 2002, during the same period that Congressman Weldon was touting it to US companies, pressuring the US Trade and Development Agency on its behalf, and defending Itera's reputation against corruption allegations in a speech on the floor of the House of Representatives.

It is not clear whether any money actually changed hands, and Karen Weldon's registration as Itera's lobbyist was not renewed when it lapsed in 2004.

The allegations against Curt Weldon became known in 2004, when the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Los Angeles Times* published detailed accounts. The *Times* article, part of a series on congressmen and senators whose relatives profited from lobbying, led to a formal complaint being filed with the House Ethics Committee, which found that Weldon had not breached House rules. No federal investigation ensued.

What changed between 2004 and May 2006, when a federal grand jury in Washington DC was presented with evidence obtained by cell phone wiretaps of Weldon's family and associates, an indication that US intelligence agencies had been interested in the congressman for some months?

During the summer of 2005, Weldon, vice-chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, revealed the existence of a secret Pentagon counter-terrorism operation codenamed Able Danger, which he claimed had identified Mohammed Atta, alleged ringleader of the 9/11 attacks, as early as 1999.

It has been widely reported in Europe that Atta was known to US

intelligence agencies and was actually under FBI surveillance in Germany in 1999, a circumstance that undermines the incessant Bush administration claims that the 9/11 attacks came out of the blue and that the US government had no idea before September 2001 that Al Qaeda terrorists were in the United States planning terrorist attacks.

This information has been largely suppressed in the American media, and the existence of Able Danger was covered up by the official 9/11 Commission in order to sustain its whitewash of the role of US military and intelligence agencies in permitting and even facilitating the attacks.

Weldon said that Able Danger had also identified three other future 9/11 hijackers as Al Qaeda loyalists: Marwan Al-Shehhi, Khalid Almidhar and Nawaf Alhazmi

Perhaps the most remarkable charge made by Weldon is that he had been in possession of a "link chart" tracing the connections of various individuals connected to Al Qaeda, and containing Atta's photograph and name, and had turned it over to deputy national security adviser Stephen Hadley at a meeting in the White House on September 25, 2001.

Both Hadley and another Republican congressman, Dan Burton of Indiana, have confirmed the meeting with Weldon on that date and the handover of the link chart, although Hadley denies that Atta's photograph was on it. The chart itself has disappeared, according to the White House.

Weldon's revelations were confirmed by five military officers or Pentagon contractors formerly involved in Able Danger. Colonel Anthony Shaffer came forward as one of the sources of Weldon's allegations, telling the press that the 9/11 Commission had been informed of the Able Danger project and had asked the Pentagon for documents on it, then said nothing about Able Danger in its final report.

In response to these charges, a hastily organized Pentagon internal investigation issued a report in September 2005 denying that the data mining effort had actually identified Atta. When Senator Arlen Specter, a Pennsylvania Republican, convened a hearing on Weldon's allegations, the Pentagon ordered the officers previously involved in Able Danger—including Shaffer, now an analyst with the Defense Intelligence Agency—not to testify.

Four months later, there was another response by the Pentagon to Curt Weldon. Vice Admiral Joseph Sestak announced that he

would seek the nomination of the Democratic Party to run for Congress in the 7th District of Pennsylvania, the seat held by Weldon. Sestak was newly retired after a 31-year naval career, including command of the *USS George Washington* battle group in the Indian Ocean during the US invasion of Afghanistan.

Sestak made the announcement at a press conference February 1, 2006, in Media, Pennsylvania, where he was welcomed by the entire local Democratic Party establishment, including Paul Scoles, who ran against Weldon in 2004 and had already entered the race in 2006. Scoles announced he was withdrawing and endorsing the admiral.

Since then, Sestak has been one of the top fundraisers among congressional Democrats. He is one of a handful of challengers who have actually raised as much money as the incumbent Republicans they are opposing.

In his third-quarter filing with the Federal Election Commission, Sestak reported raising \$1.2 million from July through September and \$2.3 million overall. He outraised Weldon in the third quarter and had \$1.6 million in cash on hand for the final month of the campaign, compared to \$1.1 million for Weldon. By contrast, Scoles raised only \$24,000 for his 2004 campaign against Weldon, when the Democratic Party made only a token effort, although the 7th Congressional District actually voted by 53 to 47 percent for John Kerry in the presidential race.

The FBI raid on Weldon's daughter's home and office has had an immediate and probably decisive effect on the current congressional campaign. Weldon suffered a sharp drop in the polls, and *Congressional Quarterly*, which had rated the contest a toss-up, shifted its rating for the district to "leans Democratic." Conceivably, if there is a closely divided result in the congressional elections November 7, the FBI's attack on Weldon could tip the balance and give control of the House to the Democrats.

It is a longstanding practice of the FBI to refrain from engaging in any dramatic action related to political corruption in the weeks immediately preceding an election, out of concern that this would be regarded as an effort to interfere with the electoral process.

The most famous instance of this rule came in September 1992, when a Republican loyalist, L. Jean Lewis, an investigator for the federal agency handling the liquidation of bankrupt savings and loan institutions, filed a criminal referral on September 2, 1992, charging that Bill and Hillary Clinton had corruptly profited from the collapse of Madison Guaranty through their partnership in the failed Whitewater investment with former Madison chief Jim McDougal. She followed this up with phone calls and visits to Little Rock, Arkansas demanding an immediate investigation into the Democratic presidential candidate.

On October 16, 1992, only three weeks before the election, the FBI agent in charge of the Little Rock, Arkansas office, Charles Banks, a Reagan appointee, rejected Lewis's request, citing the politically motivated timing. In a letter to FBI headquarters in Washington, Banks wrote, "I must opine that after such a lapse of time, the insistence for urgency in this case appears to suggest an intentional or unintentional attempt to intervene into the political process of the upcoming presidential election."

Fourteen years later, the FBI offices in Washington and

Philadelphia have proceeded in exactly the opposite fashion, carrying out raids which have no other explanation than an "attempt to intervene into the political process."

FBI officials claimed that they had no choice but to order the raids, despite the close proximity of Election Day, because of a report carried by McClatchy Newspapers October 14 that the FBI had recommended a Justice Department investigation into Congressman Weldon's actions. But this raises the following question: who leaked the information to McClatchy? The most plausible explanation is that the existence of the investigation was leaked by the FBI itself, or other government sources in the know, in order to provide the necessary pretext for a pre-election raid.

An attorney for Weldon questioned the timing of the leak and subsequent raid, speaking to the *Los Angeles Times*. "I think it is very suspicious that 2 1/2 years after the *Los Angeles Times* broke the story, that the FBI is now getting around to looking at it three weeks before the election," said William B. Canfield. Weldon himself, in an interview with the University of Pennsylvania student newspaper, the *Daily Pennsylvanian*, described the timing of the accusations as a "gross abuse of the American electoral process."

Weldon is a right-wing Republican and longtime advocate of a preemptive war by the United States against Iran. He published a book last year which claimed that Osama bin Laden was in Iran and that Iran was preparing terrorist attacks on the United States, possibly with nuclear weapons. His attacks on the US intelligence agencies arise in part from his repeated conflicts with the CIA over its refusal to credit such claims peddled by Iranian royalist exiles like Manucher Ghorbanifar, a key figure in the Iran-Contra scandal of the 1980s.

Weldon and his daughter may well be guilty of influence-peddling, although by the standards of the current Congress, their actions are hardly unusual. But both the claims of official corruption and Weldon's bizarre right-wing views were well known in 2004, when he drew only token opposition for re-election. It is likely that Weldon's public questioning of the official consensus on the 9/11 attacks has produced this legal and political retaliation from the military-intelligence apparatus.



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