

CIA 9/11 “accountability” report released: A whitewash that only raises more questions

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Preaching accountability to the CIA is like preaching fairness to Wall Street or honesty to the White House. It's not merely futile, it's counterproductive. The effort itself reinforces illusions in institutions that by their very nature are committed to double-dealing, fraud and lies.

It was completely predictable that the “Report on CIA Accountability With Respect to the 9/11 Attacks,” drafted by the CIA’s Office of Inspector General in 2005, the executive summary of which was finally made public Tuesday, would be a whitewash of the agency: CIA agents did their best to prevent 9/11, it concludes, but they failed because of mistakes and “systemic problems.” No CIA officials violated the law, and none were guilty of misconduct.

In the view of Inspector General John Helgerson, himself an 23-year veteran at the agency, CIA agents have the best intentions and are of the highest moral character, always striving to fulfill their responsibility to protect the American people from terrorists and other evil-doers. If they make “mistakes” along the way, that only proves they are human.

This glowing portrayal of an organization that is the world’s leading practitioner of torture, assassination and anti-democratic subversion is an insult to the intelligence of anyone with a modicum of political literacy. It is nonetheless readily embraced by the servile American media.

For six years the media has uncritically parroted the claims that on September 11, 2001 “America” was attacked by “terrorists,” ignoring the well-documented fact that these “terrorists” were led by men who had been on the payroll of “America” only a few years before. Moreover, their connections with US intelligence continued, according to many reports, right up to the day the airplanes slammed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

The press coverage of the OIG report dutifully echoes the company line, focusing largely on the inspector general’s criticisms of mismanagement by former CIA director George Tenet and other top CIA officials, and the retorts by Tenet and current CIA officials.

Comparatively little attention has been given to the handful of important factual revelations in the report, which raise new questions about the relationship between US intelligence agencies and Al Qaeda, as well as the role these agencies played in the period leading up to the 9/11 attacks.

Much of the report rehashes well-established instances of CIA inaction, most notoriously the still-unexplained failure to place two

future 9/11 hijackers, Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar, on a US government watch list after the CIA learned, in January and March 2000, that the two men, known to be linked to Al Qaeda, had obtained visas to enter the United States.

Al-Hazmi and Al-Mihdhar subsequently arrived in Los Angeles, then settled in San Diego, where they lodged for a time in the home of a Saudi immigrant who was the principal FBI informer in the city’s Arab-American community. They took flight lessons, albeit unsuccessfully, and one of them, al-Mihdhar, went in and out of the country several times. In September 2001, they flew to the Washington DC area, met other 9/11 hijackers at a Maryland motel, and participated in the suicide attack on American Airlines Flight 77, which struck the Pentagon.

A staggering fact, made public for the first time, is that as many as 50 to 60 CIA officers had read intelligence reports about the potential entry of the two Al Qaeda operatives into the US. None of them took action—mandatory in such a case—to put their names on the watch list used by US immigration agents to check visitors at points of entry. None of them notified the FBI, which had primary responsibility to monitor suspected terrorists once they were on US soil.

The OIG report called for a formal Accountability Board review of the performance of at least three senior managers “for failing to ensure prompt action relevant to al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar during several later opportunities between March 2000 and August 2001.”

Despite the recent claims by Tenet that he was a fierce advocate of all-out war against Al Qaeda from at least 1998, the OIG report found that over a four-year period (1997-2001), “Agency managers moved funds from the base budgets of the Counterterrorist Center and other counterterrorism programs to meet other corporate and Directorate of Operations (DO) needs ... Conversely, no resources were reprogrammed from other Agency programs to counterterrorism.”

In light of the report, the establishment of the CIA’s Osama bin Laden unit in 1998 appears to have been a put-up job, a pretense rather than a serious effort. The report concedes that this group “had an excessive workload. Most of its officers did not have the operational experience, expertise, and training necessary to accomplish their mission in an effective manner.”

This resource allocation is significant given the CIA’s longstanding covert relationship with Osama bin Laden, going back to his role in the mujaheddin guerrillas in Afghanistan—the Islamic fundamentalists recruited, trained, armed and financed by

the CIA to fight the Soviet army in the 1980s.

Al Qaeda (“the base” in Arabic), was formed by bin Laden to continue the struggle against non-Muslim forces operating in Muslim countries—Americans in Saudi Arabia after the 1991 war with Iraq, rather than Russians in Afghanistan—using the terrorist methods and techniques which he learned from his CIA instructors.

In the course of the 1990s, bin Laden became more publicly hostile to US interests in the Middle East, eventually issuing a “declaration of war” in 1998 which coincided with the devastating Al Qaeda bombings of two US embassies in east Africa, killing hundreds.

Yet according to the OIG report, the only written CIA assessment of bin Laden was made in 1993—i.e., during the period when his relationship to the US intelligence apparatus was still quite recent, and likely ongoing. No strategic assessment of the danger of Al Qaeda was ever drafted by the CIA before 9/11, and the agency went from 1997 to 2001 without drafting a formal National Intelligence Estimate on the danger of terrorist attacks on US targets.

The report also spotlights the curious attitude of top CIA officials towards Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (referred to as KSM), who was seized in Pakistan in 2002 and is currently imprisoned at Guantánamo Bay. While Mohammed is now regularly described as the principal organizer of the 9/11 suicide hijackings, through most of the 1990s he was considered a minor or peripheral figure in bin Laden’s circle.

According to the report, the Counterterrorist Center (CTC) “did not recognize the significance of reporting from credible sources in 2000 and 2001 that portrayed [Mohammed] as a senior al Qa’ida lieutenant and thus missed important indicators of terrorist planning.” The reports on Mohammed “included the allegation that KSM was sending terrorists to the United States to engage in activities on behalf of Bin Laden.”

The report continues, “[T]he management approach employed in CTC had the effect of actively reinforcing the separation of responsibilities among the key CTC units working on KSM,” and then recommends a formal Accountability Board review of those managers, plus an individual or unit whose name is redacted “for failure to produce any [redacted] coverage of Khalid Shaykh Muhammad from 1997 to 2001.”

In other words, the principal organizer of the 9/11 attacks was being “handled” by top CIA officials in a fashion so peculiar and so at odds with normal practices that the OIG recommended disciplinary action—without, of course, admitting the possibility that this treatment amounted to the deliberate protection of a CIA asset.

The OIG report was initially commissioned in response to the Joint Inquiry by the Senate and House intelligence committees, conducted in 2002, which criticized the performance of the CIA in the years before the 9/11 attacks. That inquiry was driven by congressional Republicans, then in control of Congress, who sought to focus blame for the colossal security failure on the Clinton administration rather than the Bush White House.

Like all inquiries into 9/11, the OIG probe was an exercise in damage control and an expression of political infighting within the

military, political and intelligence establishment in Washington. These divisions—whose fundamental source is the debacle of the US project for seizing control of the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia—run both between and within the Pentagon, the CIA, the NSA, the FBI and State Department.

What was released, in any case, was not the report itself, hundreds of pages long, but a 19-page executive summary, heavily redacted to remove the names of CIA employees, foreign intelligence agencies cooperating with the CIA, and other “sensitive” information.

The OIG made many criticisms of former CIA Director George Tenet and his associates, recommending the establishment of formal reviews to determine whether administrative punishment was warranted for ten separate cases of performance failure by agency officials. But it also admitted that not a single CIA officer or official has been so much as reprimanded as a result of the 9/11 attacks, and many of those directly implicated have subsequently received promotions.

The CIA flatly has rejected the conclusions of its own Inspector General. Tenet’s successor—former congressman Porter Goss, an ex-CIA agent—refused to hold anyone accountable for any failure to act before 9/11. The current CIA chief, General Michael Hayden, declared Wednesday that he agreed with Goss’s decision and would not implement the report’s recommendations.

It is noteworthy, however, that the White House did not seek to block the release of the OIG report with the same intransigence that it has applied to resisting congressional scrutiny of the Justice Department firings of US attorneys, Vice President Cheney’s energy task force, or a myriad other administration scandals. It was perfectly willing to see the CIA, long seen as politically hostile, take a public whipping.

Thus, when the Democratic-controlled Congress enacted legislation last month implementing numerous recommendations of the 9/11 Commission, including a requirement that the CIA make public the OIG report, Bush signed the bill into law and instructed the CIA to comply.



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