

Ex-White House counter-terror chief charges CIA shielded 9/11 hijackers

Bill Van Auken
13 August 2011

The former chief White House counterterrorism adviser in both the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations charges in a recently released interview that the CIA deliberately concealed the presence in the United States of two Saudi members of Al Qaeda who subsequently participated in the September 11, 2001 terror attacks.

“There was a high level decision in the CIA ordering people not to share that information,” Richard Clarke, the former counterterrorism “czar” said in the October 2009 interview that was released this week by the makers of an upcoming documentary entitled “Who is Richard Blee?” Blee is a CIA officer who headed the agency’s Osama bin Laden unit in the period leading up to 9/11.

Asked at how high a level such a decision would have been made, Clarke responded, “I would think it would have to be made by the director,” referring to then-CIA Director George Tenet.

Tenet has responded to the charges in a joint statement issued with Blee and Cofer Black, the former head of the CIA’s counterterrorism center, who went on to become a top official at Blackwater and other private intelligence/security companies. They called Clarke’s charges “reckless and profoundly wrong.” They went on to claim that they had been exonerated of any wrongdoing exhaustively by the 9/11 Commission, the Congressional Joint Inquiry and the CIA Inspector General’s report.

All of these probes served essentially to whitewash the role of government agencies in the 9/11 events. Referring to their own participation in these investigations, the three former CIA officials wrote, “We testified under oath about what we did, what we knew and what we didn’t know. We stand by that testimony.”

According to the documentary makers, when informed of the statement, Clarke said that he maintained the positions expressed in the 2009 interview.

In that interview, Clarke, asked if he had questioned Tenet and the other top CIA officials about the concealed information, responded, “They got away with it. They’re not going to tell you even if you waterboarded them.”

The CIA had been following the two Al Qaeda operatives—Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar—as early as 1999. The first of the 9/11 hijackers to enter the US, they were ultimately identified as two of those aboard American Airlines Flight 77, which crashed into the Pentagon on September 11.

Working together with Malaysian intelligence, the CIA monitored their activities and videotaped them when they attended a 2000 planning meeting of Al Qaeda and other Islamist terrorist groups in Kuala Lumpur, the Malaysian capital.

They subsequently flew to Thailand, where the CIA claimed it had lost track of them, and then boarded a flight to the US, arriving in Los Angeles on January 15, 2000.

While the CIA was aware that one of the two Al Qaeda members had obtained a US visa, it made no attempt to alert the FBI or the US State Department in order to have their names placed on a “terrorist watch list” so that they could be apprehended or put under surveillance upon entry into the US.

In the 13-minute videotaped interview posted by the makers of the upcoming documentary on their web site, secrecykills.com, Clarke suggests that the CIA shielded the Al Qaeda members from the scrutiny of other agencies because its aim was to “flip” them, recruiting them as informants inside the terrorist group. He describes this theory as “the only conceivable reason that I’ve been able to come up with” as to why the CIA would fail to inform the FBI or even the White House about their presence inside the US.

He noted that, had the FBI learned of the presence of the two Saudis inside the US, they would have come under its jurisdiction, interfering with the supposed CIA plans to recruit and run them as its own “assets.” Clarke further speculated that the agency worked through Saudi intelligence as a means of circumventing the legal restrictions on CIA operations inside the US.

Clarke dismissed Tenet’s claims that he was unaware of the intelligence on the two Al Qaeda operatives. “George Tenet followed all the information about Al Qaeda in microscopic detail,” he said in the interview. “He read raw intelligence reports before analysts in counterterrorism did, and he would pick up the phone and call me at 7:30 in the morning to talk about them.”

Clarke said that while he had originally thought that the failure to alert other agencies about al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar had been a case of “one lonely CIA analyst” failing to recognize the importance of the information, he now knows that “No, fifty, 5-0, CIA personnel knew about this. Among the fifty people in CIA who knew these guys were in the country was the CIA director.”

He further charged that his not being made aware of this intelligence could only be the result of a direct order to stop the information from reaching the White House. “Unless someone intervened to stop the normal automatic distribution [of

intelligence files], I would automatically get it,” he said.

“For me to this day,” he added, “it is inexplicable why, when I had every other detail about everything related to terrorism, that the director didn’t tell me, that the director of the counterterrorism center didn’t tell me, that the other 48 people inside CIA that knew about it never mentioned it to me or anyone in my staff in a period of over 12 months ... We therefore conclude that there was a high-level decision inside CIA ordering people not to share that information.”

As damning as his conclusions are, Clarke’s theory may be, in fact, one of the more charitable explanations of the CIA’s silence on the presence of the two Al Qaeda members in California.

The two enjoyed high-level protection from the moment of their arrival in early 2000. They were met at the airport by one Omar al-Bayoumi, an employee of the Saudi civil aviation authority, who US investigators concluded was an agent of Saudi intelligence. According to press reports, they received thousands of dollars in funding funneled to them by Princess Haifa, the wife of Prince Bandar, the Saudi ambassador in Washington and a close confidante of the Bush family.

The two were able to live openly in the US, using credit cards in their names, with one of them even having a listing in the telephone directory. And they took flight lessons.

Between their initial entry in January 2000 and September 11, 2001, al-Mihdhar was able to fly out of the country and back in again with no difficulty. Al-Hazmi, meanwhile, was able to renew his visa.

Shortly after their arrival, al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar moved into the San Diego, California home of Abdussatar Shaikh, who was a paid informant of the FBI, charged with monitoring activities of Islamist groups in the area. The FBI subsequently attempted to conceal the close relation formed by its informant with the hijackers. When a joint congressional committee attempted to subpoena Shaikh, the FBI flatly refused, saying that the Bush administration would not allow it.

Former Florida Democratic Senator Bob Graham, who was chairman and then ranking minority member of the Senate intelligence panel, wrote in his book *Intelligence Matters* of this unprecedented defiance of a congressional subpoena: “We were seeing in writing what we had suspected for some time: the White House was directing a cover-up.”

In the film interview, Clarke also points to two key meetings held in the run-up to 9/11. The first was a meeting sought by CIA Director Tenet with then National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice on July 10, 2001, in which Tenet and CIA counterterrorism director Black warned that Al Qaeda was preparing an attack on US interests, possibly in the US itself.

Clarke noted that in the course of this meeting the two failed to provide the “most persuasive information you’ve got,” i.e., they “never once mentioned that already two Al Qaeda terrorists known to be involved in the Kuala Lumpur planning session had entered the United States.”

He also cited a September 4, 2001, “principals” meeting of senior officials involved in national security in which, once again, there was no mention by the CIA director of the two known Al Qaeda operatives within the US, even though by this time lower-

level FBI officials had been informed. Clarke said that there was one obvious reason for the silence. If it had been reported, it would have raised sharp questions as to how long the CIA had known about the two and why they had not reported it earlier. It would have triggered an immediate investigation into “malfeasance and misfeasance” by the US intelligence agency, he said.

Had the information been provided even at that date, just a week before the terror attacks, the former counterterrorism advisor said, the two Al Qaeda members would have been arrested and the 9/11 plot likely disrupted. “There’s no doubt in my mind, even with only a week left,” Clarke said. “They were using credit cards in their own names. They were staying in the Charles Hotel in Harvard Square, for heaven’s sake ... those guys would have been arrested within 24 hours.”

Whatever the validity of Clarke’s theory about the CIA trying to recruit al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar, the eruption of a bitter controversy between the former White House counterterrorism adviser and the former CIA director and other senior agency officials only underscores that, nearly a full decade after the attacks, there has been no genuine independent investigation of the terrible events of 9/11. Moreover, not a single US official has been held responsible for what ostensibly stands as the most catastrophic intelligence failure in American history.

This determined cover-up, begun by the Bush administration and continued under Obama, poses the most critical unanswered question. Was 9/11 the result of disastrous and potentially criminal miscalculations by those at the top of the CIA, or was it the outcome of a conscious decision by elements within the US state to allow a terrorist attack to take place on American soil with the aim of creating a pretext for implementing long-prepared plans to launch wars of aggression abroad and sweeping attacks on democratic rights at home?



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact