

September 11: After two years, cover-up begins to unravel

By Bill Vann
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Today marks the second anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks. After two years, little more has been revealed publicly about the circumstances that led to the deaths of 3,000 innocent people than was known the day after the planes struck the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. As the result of a concerted attempt by the Bush administration to stonewall any serious investigation, these events remain cloaked in mystery. A myriad of unanswered questions persist about how the most powerful military-intelligence apparatus in the world failed to either detect such a terrorist plot or interfere with it once it was launched.

Yet, the traumatic losses of September 11 have become the touchstone for all of the administration's policies, invoked as the pretext for two wars—and tens of thousands of deaths—in the space of 18 months. They have likewise been used to justify sweeping attacks on basic democratic rights in the name of a “war on terrorism,” as well as the destruction of jobs and living standards, as ever greater resources are shifted from social needs to the financing of militarism.

Most recently, President Bush made the September 11 attacks the principal theme in his speech Sunday calling for \$87 billion to finance open-ended occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan and to defend his administration against charges that a policy of illegal military aggression has led to political catastrophe.

Bush repeated the fantastic suggestion that the war against Iraq was motivated by a nonexistent link between the Saddam Hussein regime and the September 11 terrorists. This lie has come to the fore as the original claim that the invasion was required to eliminate weapons of mass destruction has been universally discredited.

There is a growing sense that the policies of the present administration—installed by fraud with the purpose of instituting far-reaching changes designed to benefit the wealthiest layers of US society—are coming disastrously unstuck. Disquiet within ruling circles has given rise to increasingly sharp attacks on the Bush administration both from its political rivals and its erstwhile allies.

In Britain, where the Blair government's support for the Iraq war and its lies concerning alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction have provoked mass opposition, the widening divisions within the establishment have found their expression in an open attack on the Bush administration's official version of the September 11 events from a leading member of the ruling Labour Party.

Michael Meacher, who until last June was a member of Blair's cabinet and the most veteran minister within the Labour government, published an article in the British *Guardian* that presented a highly disturbing body of evidence indicating that significant sections within the US state apparatus anticipated some form of terrorist attack, yet failed to take action to stop it [see: “British official charges US ‘stood down’ on 9/11”].

The material strongly suggests that, while they may not have anticipated carnage on the scale of the World Trade Center, these elements welcomed an act of terrorism that they believed would provide justification for setting into motion a far-reaching and long-planned agenda of global

military aggression. Meacher raised the question of whether US security operations could “have been deliberately stood down on September 11. If so why, and on whose authority?”

Meanwhile, in the US itself the Bush administration has conducted a systematic cover-up of information concerning the September 11 attacks. It routinely invokes “national security” to prevent the dissemination to the American people of information that is obviously already in the hands of those whom it is supposedly combating in its “global war on terrorism.”

What the administration chose to censor from the report issued in July by the joint congressional committee investigation into intelligence failures preceding the September 11 attacks sheds some light on the nature and motives of this government's cover-up.

A full 28-page chapter of the report was reduced to page after page of blank lines, classified on the pretext of “national security.” The government's aim was to suppress information concerning the complicity of the Saudi government in the suicide attacks. Fifteen of the nineteen people identified as the hijackers were Saudi citizens.

Following the release of the report in July, Sen. Bob Graham, ranking Democrat and former chairman on the Senate Select Intelligence Committee which led the investigation, indicated that the censored material dealt with active assistance that Saudi officials rendered to the hijackers and evidence that they were acting with the knowledge of the ruling monarchy.

“High officials in this government, who I assume were not just rogue officials acting on their own, made substantial contributions to the support and well-being of two of these terrorists and facilitated their ability to plan, practice and execute the tragedy of September 11,” Graham said in a television interview.

Graham was referring to the extraordinary case of Nawaf al-Hazami and Khalid al-Mihdhar, two Saudis who were identified as hijackers of American Airlines Flight 77, which was crashed into the Pentagon. Both men were known Al Qaeda operatives and tracked by US intelligence since 1999. They flew under their own names to the US after attending a meeting of the Islamist terrorist group in Malaysia, where they were under CIA surveillance. The CIA knew they had entered the country, yet nothing was done to inform any law enforcement or immigration officials. When one of the men's visas expired, the State Department quickly renewed it.

According to the congressional report, once in Los Angeles, they were met by Omar al-Bayoumi, who is described as someone who “had access to seemingly unlimited funding from Saudi Arabia” and was believed by the FBI to “be an intelligence officer for Saudi Arabia or another foreign power.”

Bayoumi went to collect the pair directly from a closed-door meeting in the Saudi consulate and then took them to San Diego. There they moved in with a man who was the FBI's chief informant in the city on Islamist groups. Thus, these two known terrorist operatives were in contact with the CIA, Saudi intelligence and the FBI in the months leading up to the

attacks.

The joint congressional committee was denied permission to interview the FBI informant.

Further indications of the connections of both the Saudi ruling family and the Pakistani military and intelligence apparatus with the September 11 hijackers have surfaced with the publication of the book “Why America Slept,” by Gerald Posner. That Posner’s thesis is taken seriously within ruling circles was made clear by a two-page review published in the September 8 issue of *Time* magazine.

Posner cited details from the US interrogation—using torture and drugs—of Abu Zubaydah, a senior aide to Osama bin Laden, who was captured in Pakistan in March 2002.

Basing himself on two government sources familiar with the interrogation, Posner reports that Zubaydah provided his captors with “the Rosetta stone of 9/11... the details of what [he] claimed was his ‘work’ for senior Saudi and Pakistani officials.”

He reports that CIA agents, in an attempt to intimidate Zubaydah, took the captured Al Qaeda operative to two Arab interrogators who posed as Saudi intelligence agents. When confronted with what he thought were Saudi police “his reaction was not fear, but utter relief,” Posner writes. He immediately gave them phone numbers for a senior member of the Saudi royal family—Prince Ahmed bin Salmaan Abdul Aziz—and told them he would “tell you what to do.”

Zubaydah described a series of meetings dating back from the early 1990s between himself and bin Laden, on the one hand; and, on the other, senior Saudi and Pakistani intelligence officials, including Prince Turki al-Faisal bin Abul Aziz, the long-time Saudi intelligence chief.

The ties of both agencies to bin Laden go back to the early 1980s and the US-backed war against the pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan, when bin Laden helped organize Arab volunteers. It was then that the CIA also established ties to his Islamic fundamentalist movement, using the Pakistani intelligence agency, the ISI, as its conduit for US arms and money. It has never been revealed when the CIA’s ties to Al Qaeda were severed.

The Al Qaeda operative went on to claim that both Saudi and Pakistani intelligence officials had been warned in advance of September 11 and “knew that attack was scheduled for American soil on that day,” though they were not informed of its targets.

Evidence of the Pakistani ties to the plot surfaced immediately after September 11, when it was revealed that Gen. Mahmud Ahmad, chief of the ISI, had ordered an electronic transfer of \$100,000 to Mohammed Atta, the supposed leader of the hijackers. He resigned in the wake of the attacks, shortly after the *Times of India* reported the transfer.

The Bush administration, writes Posner, once aware of the Saudi, Pakistani connection, decided that “creating an international incident and straining relations with those regional allies when they were critical to the war in Afghanistan and the buildup for possible war with Iraq, was out of the question.”

Therefore, the administration sought to conceal the real source of the attacks, while Vice President Richard Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and others pressured intelligence agencies to manufacture evidence that would pin the blame on Saddam Hussein. They were determined to turn September 11 into a pretext for a long-planned war aimed at seizing Iraq’s oilfields and transforming by military force the US strategic position in the Middle East and internationally.

The CIA blocked the publication of the material implicating Saudi officials on the grounds of national security, insisting that it would disrupt relations with a strategic US ally. This proscription serves, however, to protect the Bush administration, which has from September 11 on worked to conceal the Saudi connection.

That this began in the immediate aftermath of the attacks has been underscored by an article published this month in *Vanity Fair* detailing

the extraordinary measures taken to spirit some two dozen members of the bin Laden family out of the country. The article quotes former administration adviser Richard Clarke, who acknowledges that the White House organized this rescue effort, allowing private planes to fly the bin Ladens even as all other nonmilitary and non-emergency aviation was grounded.

Under conditions in which Arab and Muslim immigrants were being rounded up and indefinitely detained on the flimsiest of evidence, the bin Ladens were not even seriously questioned before being placed on a charter jet for Saudi Arabia. The article indicates that FBI officials believed some of those sent out of the country may have had knowledge about terrorist operations.

The second area of the congressional investigation subjected to censorship concerned the well-known question, “What did the president know, and when did he know it?” An appendix to the congressional intelligence report, entitled “Access Limitations Encountered by the Joint Inquiry,” states that the White House and the CIA refused to release the contents of the president’s daily briefing, which could have shown how much specific evidence Bush received about a threatened attack in the months leading up to September 11. CIA personnel were barred even from discussing the way in which the briefs are prepared. The CIA cited national security and White House executive privilege.

“Inadvertently,” the report stated, the committee got hold of some contents of an Aug. 6, 2001 briefing. This included “FBI judgments about patterns of activity consistent with preparations for hijackings or other types of attacks; as well as information acquired in May 2001 that indicated a group of Bin Ladin [sic] supporters was planning attacks in the United States with explosives.”

The same report includes a footnote citing statements by National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice claiming that this same briefing consisted merely of an “analytical report” dealing with an historical overview of bin Laden’s movement. “It was not a warning,” she falsely stated in a May 2002 press briefing. The joint committee inquiry was barred from questioning Rice.

The final report includes 15 pages detailing areas in which access to information was either denied, limited or delayed by the administration. It notes that in most cases government employees brought to testify were pre-briefed on what they could and could not say, and were accompanied by lawyers from their agencies, who frequently instructed them not to answer questions.

Leaders of the independent commission on 9/11 headed by New Jersey’s former Republican Governor Thomas Kean issued an extraordinary protest in July charging the Bush administration with similar obstructionism. Kean accused the administration of intimidating witnesses and blocking access to key documents. Bush had opposed the formation of the panel, claiming it would be a distraction from the “war on terrorism.”

This systematic government stonewalling of all inquiries into September 11 has been largely ignored by the US media. Yet it is the clearest indication that the Bush administration fears that any unfettered investigation into the events of that day would pose a mortal political threat. What is it so determined to hide?

The obvious question raised is whether elements within the US state apparatus were informed in advance that some form of terrorist action was planned by Al Qaeda and decided—not necessarily knowing the massive scale of the planned destruction—to let it proceed, with the aim of creating a pretext for launching already planned wars.

To this day there has been no truthful disclosure concerning the government’s knowledge of and response to the September 11 attacks. No one has been held accountable for what would on the surface appear to be the most catastrophic intelligence failure in US history.

The revelations that have surfaced through the tightly restricted official

inquiries and in the pages of a press that is cowed and corrupted only begins to shed light on what are undeniably criminal actions by the administration.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the authors of the September 11 attacks were intimately linked to both the Saudi and Pakistani intelligence agencies, both of which have long shared close ties with the CIA, as did Osama bin Laden himself during the period of the anti-Soviet campaign in Afghanistan.

Yet the Bush White House deliberately concealed these connections, taking active measures to protect not only the Saudi regime, but also the bin Laden family, with which both George W. Bush and his father enjoyed lucrative business ties. It then launched a false propaganda campaign aimed at convincing the American people that Iraq was to blame for the attack and war was necessary. The result is an occupation in which US soldiers and Iraqis are dying daily.

The struggle against war and occupation as well as the defense of democratic rights demands the organization of a genuinely independent inquiry into the events of September 11. Such an exposure can only be mounted as part of the independent political mobilization of the working class, in the United States and internationally.

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