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Was the FBI investigation blocked?

FBI agents allegedly had advance knowledge of dates, targets, financial transactions, and the names of the perpetrators of the impending terrorist attacks. But they claim that they were ignored or legally obstructed. Experienced FBI agent John O'Neill claims that his investigation of Osama bin Laden was opposed and obstructed by the White House. And FBI agent Ken Williams, who investigated terrorist suspects at flight schools in Phoenix, was reallocated halfway through his investigation. The Minneapolis FBI sought permission from FBI central headquarters to examine the laptop computer belonging to flight student Moussaoui, as they suspected he had plans to "fly something into the World Trade Center" — they were refused four times. The FBI, CIA, and Federal Aviation Administration had been aware as far back as 1995 that al-Qaeda had developed a plan to use passenger aircrafts as bombs — although today the existence of such information is denied. Now it is being alleged that both the FBI and the CIA intentionally blocked investigations that could have averted the catastrophe.

The 9–11 Commission released its report in 2004, concluding that there had been failures within security and intelligence organizations in terms of their investigation of the hijackers previous to the terrorist attacks. However, it also concluded that regrettable though these failures were, they were also understandable. None of those responsible for failures, such as the head of the FBI, Robert Mueller, or the then CIA boss George Tenet, lost their jobs due to incompetence; instead they remained in their positions unscathed. The American authorities, mainstream media, and not least the majority of the political establishment in the US believe that the Commission has made a good, apposite job of describing the mistakes made before September 11th. However, there are also those who believe that the failures mentioned by the Commission were not understandable and that the mistakes that were made before September 11th should never have been made. In his book *The New Pearl Harbour: Disturbing Questions about the Bush Administration and 9/11*, professor of theology David Ray Griffin claims that both the FBI and the CIA intentionally blocked investigations that could have averted the catastrophe on September 11th. He lays especial emphasis on the FBI, from within whose ranks several whistleblowers have stepped forward to claim that central management obstructed investigations that could have led to the identification of the hijackers before September 11th.

The figure that perhaps best illustrates the FBI's problems in tracking down and investigating terrorist networks is FBI agent John O'Neill. With his background as investigator of the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York in 1993, the Khobar Towers in 1996, the American Embassy in East Africa in 1998, and the USS Cole in 2000, he was one of many regarded as the Bureau's leading authority on al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. O'Neill's opinions within this field were therefore given a great deal of credibility when,

in August 2001, he resigned from his position in protest, claiming that his work had been opposed and obstructed by the White House during his investigation of Osama bin Laden. For O'Neill, the biggest obstruction to the investigation of the Islamic terrorist network were the interests of American oil companies and the role played in them by the Saudi Arabians. He also believed that all the answers, everything that was needed to destroy Osama bin Laden's organization, could be found in Saudi Arabia. According to him, his investigation was obstructed because the White House still hoped to keep open the option of a deal with the Taliban to set up a pipeline through Afghanistan.¹

In an interview with Green Press, journalist Greg Palast was also able to back up O'Neill's claims that there had been a tradition of the President interceding to obstruct investigations related to the bin Laden family, from the time George Bush senior was the Director of the CIA. Before September 11th, bin Laden himself could be investigated, but it was not permitted to investigate any other members of the family. According to Palast, this presented a problem since several members of the bin Laden family financed and maintained contact with terrorist organizations. Palast therefore believes that this was the most significant failure of the intelligence service since Pearl Harbour, this time in the form of a directive.²

The same month John O'Neill resigned from his job in the Bureau, he found a new position as Head of Security for the World Trade Center in New York. It was perhaps therefore a poignant irony that he lost his life in the attacks on this building on September 11th, in his homeland, and apparently at the hands of the enemy he had spent the greater part of his career trying to track down.

Before and after O'Neill's death, similar criticism has come from an array of the Bureau's agents and employees. In 2000, Ken Williams from the Counterterrorism Department investigated suspected terrorists at a flight school in Phoenix. Halfway through the investigation, however, he was reallocated to investigate a fatal case of suspected arson. When Williams subsequently returned to the case in Phoenix, he wrote a memo in July 2001 in which he protested against this decision. Williams was convinced that al-Qaeda was preparing to commit acts of terrorism and recommended the FBI establish a programme to investigate flight schools throughout the entire country. This recommendation was not acted upon by the FBI, and the Bush Administration claims it had no knowledge of the memo until after September 11th.³ In relation to a possible scenario involving al-Qaeda being able to use passenger aircraft as bombs, it is worth noting that the FBI, CIA, and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) were already aware — as far back as 1995 — that al-Qaeda had developed such a plan, entitled "Project Bojinka". It was originally discovered coincidentally during an investigation by the Filipino police into a suspected assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II during a visit to Manila. The plan involved hijacking 11 passenger planes over the Pacific and flying them to the US where they were to be used as bombs on buildings like the World Trade Center in New York, Sears Tower in Chicago, TransAmerica Tower in San Francisco, and the White House in Washington. This plan surfaced again during the trial of Ramsi Yousef, regarded as the instigator of the World Trade Center bombing in 1993. Ramsi testified that the plan entailed crashing a passenger plane into the CIA Headquarters in Langley, Virginia, as well as into other civic buildings.⁴

Another well-known case is the FBI's investigation of Zacarias Moussaoui at a flight school in Minneapolis. Here Moussaoui, who in August 2001 trained in a Boeing 747 simulator, was placed under surveillance by the FBI because,

according to staff at the school, he had expressed plans to use an actual 747 "as a weapon".⁵ French intelligence also warned the FBI that Moussaoui could be a threat. On the basis of this, the FBI in Minneapolis decided to seek permission from central headquarters to examine Moussaoui's laptop computer, as they feared he planned to "fly something into the World Trade Center".⁶ The request was refused four times from within the FBI; one of the departments even had knowledge of Ken William's memo recommending the investigation of flight schools. The FBI's central headquarters concluded that the links to al-Qaeda were not sufficiently proven to be able to grant permission to examine the computer. Later it would emerge that the computer held information that connected Moussaoui to a terrorist cell in Hamburg and an al-Qaeda contact in Malaysia.⁷ On the basis of this information, FBI agent Coleen Rowley sent a letter to FBI director Robert Mueller in which she claimed that the FBI had blocked the investigation in Minneapolis that could have identified several of the hijackers before September 11th.⁸

A third FBI agent who believes he was obstructed in the course of a critical investigation is Robert Wright. In 1998 in Chicago, he investigated a terrorist cell and tracked down a Saudi multimillionaire he believed had financed the bombing of the American Embassy in East Africa. Despite his belief that the case was gaining momentum, the investigation was closed in January 2001. In June of the same year, he wrote a memo in which he claimed that the FBI "only collected intelligence information so they would know who to arrest when there was a terrorist attack".⁹ In May 2002, he revealed that he intended to file a lawsuit against the FBI because they denied permission to publish a book he had written about his investigation.

One of the FBI's Turkish and Middle Eastern-language interpreters, Sibel Dinez Edmonds, also experienced the FBI's reluctance to investigate when she discovered that one of her colleagues, Can Dickerson, had worked for a Turkish organization that was under investigation by the FBI. Dickerson also had several suspicious behaviour patterns: she did not do the work she was assigned to do and would often fail to translate or wrongly translate sensitive information. In addition, she attempted to coerce Edmonds into spying for the organization to which Dickerson still had connections. Edmonds reported these circumstances to her superiors. When she did not receive a response to her complaints, she wrote a letter to the Justice Department's Inspector General and to Senator Charles Grassley of the Judiciary Committee, (which has direct oversight of the FBI) only to be dismissed from her position shortly afterwards in March 2002.¹⁰ Edmonds subsequently proceeded to file a lawsuit against the FBI, convinced she had been fired for being a whistleblower. In October of the same year, under orders from FBI director Robert Mueller, Justice Minister John Ashcroft went as far as to recommend to the judge to dismiss her claim in order to defend the interests of US foreign policy and national security.

Why it was deemed more appropriate to exclude staff members who warn of spies in the FBI's midst is a paradox for which no one thus far has been able to provide an adequate explanation. Edmonds appealed to the Supreme Court, who in turn refused to hear the case. Edmonds has nevertheless continued to fight for her rights and those of others. In 2004, she founded the National Security Whistleblowers Coalition (NSWBC), which includes over 50 previous and current public service workers. Here the whistleblowers have a forum where they can step forward freely and discuss what they believe to be reprehensible conditions within American intelligence and security organizations.

It appears that several agents and other FBI staff believed that opportunities for good police work and investigation were lost in the months before September 11th. This was what lawyer David Schippers, (also known for having brought a case against President Bill Clinton before the Court of Impeachment) experienced when he was contacted by several FBI agents who claimed that they knew about dates, targets, financial transactions, and names of the perpetrators involved in the impending terrorist attacks. Schippers claims that, armed with this information, he tried to warn John Ashcroft six weeks in advance that a terrorist attack would be launched in lower Manhattan. But the FBI threatened to sue their agents if they revealed what they knew. In order to allow the information to be publicized before a terrorist attack took place, the agents agreed with David Schippers that he would represent them in a federal courtroom, supported by Judicial Watch, an organization offering free legal assistance. In this way they would have the opportunity to be heard if they were called as witnesses.¹¹ That the agents were in possession of the type of information Schippers claims they were was also confirmed by William Norman Grigg in *The New American*. He interviewed three FBI agents who claimed that the information to which Schippers had access was common knowledge to the FBI before September 11th — and that everyone knew that it was simultaneously being ignored in Washington.¹²

For David Ray Griffin, the final Congressional Report on the Intelligence Community Activities before and after the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001¹³ is exceptionally thought-provoking. It concludes that none of the information available to American intelligence organizations "identified the time, place, and specific nature of the attacks that were planned for September 11, 2001."¹⁴ Griffin points out that at least one intelligence organization was in possession of such information.¹⁵

This article is made on the initiative of the Norwegian edition of Le Monde diplomatique only.

¹ "Mid July: John O'Neill Rails against White House and Saudi Obstructionism"

www.cooperativeresearch.org/entity.jsp?id=1521846767-1817.

² Nafeez Moussaddeq Ahmed, *The War on Freedom: How and Why America Was Attacked September 11, 2001*, Tree of Life Publications, California 2002. 185–86.

³ "September 11 warnings: Who knew what, and when?". CNN, 24. Mai, 2002 <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/US/05/22/9.11.warnings.facts/index.html>.

⁴ Ahmed, 82–85.

⁵ David Ray Griffin, *The New Pearl Harbour: Disturbing Questions about the Bush Administration and 9/11*. Ariss Publishing 2004, 80.

⁶ Ibid, 81.

⁷ Ibid, 82.

⁸ The letter is partially reproduced in "Why Didn't the FBI Fully Investigate Moussaoui?", *Time Magazine*, 23 May 2002. www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,249500,00html.

⁹ Griffin, 83.

¹⁰ Ed Bradley, "Lost in Translation", CBS, 8 August 2004

www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/10/25/60minutes/main526954.shtml.

¹¹ Griffin, 84–85. We bring the reader's attention to the following: In relation to the section reading "But the FBI threatened to sue their agents [...]", Griffin refers to the following sources: World Net Daily, 21 October; "David Schippers Goes Public: The FBI Was Warned," *Indianapolis Star*, 13 October; and "Active FBI Special Agent Files Complaint Concerning Obstructed FBI Anti-Terrorist Investigations", *Judicial Watch*, 13 November 2001; cited in Ahmed, 107–109, and "Timeline", broadcast in July 2001.

¹² William Norman Grigg, "Did We Know What Was Coming?" *The New American*, 11 March 2002 www.thenewamerican.com/artman/publish/article_887.shtml.

¹³ Can be downloaded from: www.gpoaccess.gov/serialset/creports/911.html.

¹⁴ Ibid, Final Report, Part One, 7.

¹⁵ Griffin, 85.

Published 2006-08-28

Original in Norwegian

Translation by Nicole Fishlock

Contribution by Le Monde diplomatique (Oslo)

First published in *Le Monde diplomatique* (Oslo) 8/2006 (English version)

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