

Part 2: Watching the hijackers

Was the US government alerted to September 11 attack?

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The United States government maintains the world's largest apparatus for collecting intelligence and monitoring telecommunications, comprised of multiple agencies—CIA, FBI, National Security Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, Defense Signals Intercept Organization, etc.—bankrolled by a secret budget estimated at a staggering \$30 billion a year.

Yet the Bush administration claims, with no dissent from the tame American media, that this huge national security apparatus had not the slightest inkling that nearly two dozen men were preparing to hijack commercial jetliners and crash them into the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Nor has there been any public clamor for the removal of those whose seeming incompetence, if the official story is to be believed, cost the lives of nearly 3,000 American citizens.

What has emerged over the past four months, however, is a much different picture of the events of September 11 and the relation of the US military-intelligence complex to them. Not only were there frequent advance warnings, derived both from foreign intelligence services and US investigations into previous terrorist attacks [Was the US government alerted to September 11 attack? Part 1: Warnings in advance], but the US government was itself in possession of considerable information from contemporaneous electronic and physical surveillance of Osama bin Laden and his associates in the Al Qaeda organization.

Electronic monitoring of bin Laden

It is well known that the National Security Agency at one time had virtually complete access to the electronic communications of bin Laden and his associates. In the period leading up to the bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, the monitoring was so extensive that NSA officials used to play back telephone conversations between bin Laden and his mother to impress visiting dignitaries—and help boost their congressional appropriations.

By one account, the NSA had recorded virtually every minute of conversations on a satellite telephone which bin Laden was using in Afghanistan. The laptop device was purchased in New York City for the Al Qaeda leader, who used all of its more than 2,000 prepaid minutes phoning supporters in dozens of countries—a fact that suggests that he was less than the world's greatest conspirator. (Source: *Los Angeles Times*, September 21, 2001, "Hate Unites an Enemy Without an Army," by Bob Drogin; *Chicago Tribune*, September 16, 2001, "Bin Laden, associates elude spy agency's eavesdropping," by Scott Shane)

US officials have suggested that this access was abruptly cut off after bin Laden learned that the monitored communications had helped the Pentagon target a training camp in eastern Afghanistan for the cruise missile strike ordered by President Clinton. The Al Qaeda leader stopped using telephones and other electronic devices entirely, they claim, resorting to couriers and other forms of direct communication which cannot be monitored so easily.

Such claims are dismissed as US disinformation by many knowledgeable observers. Longtime Egyptian journalist and former government spokesman Mohammed Heikal, in an interview with a British newspaper, expressed disbelief that bin Laden and his Al Qaeda group could have conducted the September 11 attack without the United States knowing: "Bin Laden has been under surveillance for years: every telephone call was monitored and Al-Qaeda has been penetrated by American intelligence, Pakistani intelligence, Saudi intelligence, Egyptian intelligence. They could not have kept secret an operation that required such a degree of organisation and sophistication." (Source: Heikal interview with the *Guardian*, October 10, 2001)

The more sweeping the US government claims about the global scope and high-level coordination of bin Laden's activities, the less credible is the claim that electronic monitoring has yielded no results. It would be practically impossible to avoid any kind of electronic interchange of information in operating a worldwide network capable of carrying out attacks in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe and the United States.

There have been scattered reports in the press suggesting that bin Laden's associates, if not the Islamic fundamentalist leader himself, have used electronic communications devices and these have been monitored by US agencies.

UPI correspondent Richard Sale, covering the trial of bin Laden followers in New York City last year, reported that the National Security Agency had broken bin Laden's encrypted communications. Given that US officials "believe the planning for the Sept. 11 attacks probably began two years ago," (*New York Times*, October 14, 2001) this suggests that some information on the preparations for September 11 was available to electronic intercept. (Source: United Press International, February 13, 2001)

The clearest suggestion of successful US monitoring of Al Qaeda communications—and the closest to the September 11 attacks—was the statement by Utah Senator Orrin Hatch, a conservative Republican with wide contacts in the national security establishment. He told the Associated Press on September 11 that the US government was monitoring bin Laden's communications electronically and had overheard two bin Laden aides celebrating the successful terrorist attack. "They have an intercept of some information that included people associated with bin Laden who acknowledged a couple of targets were hit," he told AP.

(Source: Associated Press, September 11, 2001, “World Trade Center collapses in terrorist attack,” by David Crary and Jerry Schwartz)

Hatch repeated this assertion in an interview with ABC News the same day, saying that both CIA and FBI officials had told him the same story. That his statement was true is demonstrated by the Bush administration reaction. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld publicly denounced the report as an unauthorized release of classified information. The White House later cited this leak as grounds for withholding detailed information on US counterterrorist actions from Congress, although Bush was later compelled to resume the briefings of a handful of congressional leaders.

There were several other media reports of similar successful monitoring of Al Qaeda communications. The German magazine *Der Spiegel* said that officers from the German intelligence service BND intercepted phone conversations between two bin Laden supporters. NBC News reported October 4 that bin Laden called his mother two days before the World Trade Center attack and told her, “In two days you’re going to hear big news, and you’re not going to hear from me for a while.” NBC said that a foreign intelligence service had recorded the call and relayed the information to the US. Such reports must be considered cautiously, especially coming as they did on the eve of the launching of US air strikes on Afghanistan. But it is impossible to avoid the conclusion: if US intelligence agencies could obtain such information after September 11, they were able to do so before that date. (Source: *Toronto Globe & Mail*, October 5, 2001)

Besides the actual communications among the hijackers and their co-conspirators, there was another electronic tip-off to September 11. It has been widely reported that during the week before the suicide hijackings, there was sudden and unexplained speculation in the stock of American and United airlines. Huge bets were placed that the stock prices of both airlines would plunge, as did happen after two American and two United jets were hijacked and crashed. No other airlines saw such speculation, and the identity of those who placed the thousands of “put” options—bets that a stock will go down—has not been revealed.

Less well known is the fact that the CIA operates a sophisticated software system, known as Promis, which monitors such sudden price movements for the specific purpose of providing advance warning that a particular industry or corporation may be targeted for a terrorist attack. This software provides around-the-clock real-time monitoring, so that CIA officials would have been alerted as early as September 7 that American and United were potential targets. According to the right-wing, stridently pro-Bush Fox News network, both the FBI and the Justice Department have confirmed that Promis was in use last summer for US intelligence gathering. There is no indication that the CIA warned either the airlines themselves or the US agencies responsible for domestic security.

How many hijackers were known?

According to the official Bush administration account of the terrorist attacks, only 2 of the 19 alleged suicide hijackers were known to US authorities before September 11. These two, Kahlil Almihdhar and Nawaf Alhamzi, had been placed on an FBI “watch list” at the request of the CIA, after Almihdhar was linked to a bin Laden operative in Malaysia.

Innumerable accounts in the American media sought to answer the questions that were inevitably raised by this version of events. How was it possible for two men being sought by the FBI and CIA, with alleged ties to the man the US government had branded the most dangerous terrorist in world, to buy expensive first-class one-way tickets for an airline flight, then board and hijack a jetliner on September 11?

Almihdhar and Alhamzi apparently lived in southern California, in the

San Diego area for nearly two years, leaving and reentering the United States at least once—only a few weeks before the “watch list” alert was issued. According to one press report, Alhamzi was even listed in the San Diego phone book—a fact that certainly calls into question the media portrayal of the suicide hijackers as master conspirators who covered their tracks and were essentially undetectable. (Source: *Washington Post*, December 29, 2001)

Whatever the circumstances in which these two future hijackers escaped detection, however, the basic premise of the official story—that these two were the only hijackers identified as terrorist suspects before September 11—is false. Several other hijackers or men now believed to be their accomplices had come to the attention of US police and intelligence agencies before the destruction of the World Trade Center, but they were allowed to go their way.

There is the strange case of Ziad Samir Jarrah, one of the suspected hijackers on board the United Airlines jet that crashed in Pennsylvania. Officials in the United Arab Emirates acknowledge that Jarrah arrived in the UAE on January 30, 2001, after two months in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and was questioned for several hours at Dubai International Airport, at the request of the US government. He was then permitted to leave, traveling on to Hamburg via Amsterdam. Later he flew to the United States.

Despite official US interest sufficient to have him detained in the UAE, he was allowed to enter the country and then enrolled in a flight school. Jarrah was stopped for speeding on Interstate 95 in Maryland on September 9, two days before the hijacking, ticketed and released. The Maryland State Police apparently ran his name through their computers and found nothing. In response to post-September 11 inquiries, FBI and CIA officials claimed that neither agency had been aware of Jarrah or placed him on any watch list, although some US government agency had sought his detention eight months before in Dubai. (Sources: *Chicago Tribune*, December 14, 2001; *Baltimore Sun*, December 14, 2001)

Newsweek magazine, in its special edition published immediately after the September 11 attack, made a startling claim about ties between the hijackers and the American national security apparatus. Citing US military sources, *Newsweek* reported that “five of the alleged hijackers of the planes that were used in Tuesday’s terror attacks received training at secure U.S. military installations in the 1990s.” Three had listed addresses at the Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida when they applied for driver’s licenses or car registrations. Another trained at the Air War College in Montgomery, Alabama, while the fifth took language instruction at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. The three men who trained at Pensacola were named as Saeed Alghamdi and Ahmad Alnami, both aboard United Flight 93, which crashed in Pennsylvania, and Ahmed Alghamdi, aboard United Flight 75, which hit the south tower of the World Trade Center.

FBI officials told the office of Senator Bill Nelson (D-Florida) that the agents assigned to the World Trade Center/Pentagon case were “investigating any connection to the military facility,” but that no determination had been made, because of uncertainty over whether the hijackers had stolen the IDs of other Middle East visitors to the US, especially from Saudi Arabia. Pensacola has been the site of military training for foreign aviators, including many from Saudi Arabia and other US clients in the Middle East.

Saudi officials also sought to dispute the reports that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi citizens, but these have proven to be true. There has been no further press reporting on the Pensacola story, either in *Newsweek* itself, which never did a follow-up, or any other major media outlet.

The case of Mohammed Atta

Even more extraordinary is the treatment of Mohammed Atta, the alleged ringleader of the hijackings. Atta was reportedly an object of attention for the Egyptian, German and American police and yet traveled without hindrance between Europe and America throughout 2000 and 2001.

According to a report on the German public television channel ARD, Atta was the subject of telephone monitoring by the Egyptian secret service, which had learned that he had made at least one recent visit to Afghanistan from his home in Hamburg, Germany. The German program, broadcast November 23, said that the American FBI had monitored Atta's movements for several months in 2000, when he traveled several times from Hamburg to Frankfurt and bought large quantities of chemicals potentially usable in making explosives. Atta's name was also mentioned in a Hamburg phone call between Islamic fundamentalists monitored by the German police in 1999. The BBC, commenting on the German report, said, "The evidence ... reinforces concerns that the international intelligence community may have known more about Atta before September 11 than was previously thought, but had failed to act." (Source: British Broadcasting Corporation report, November 26, 2001)

Atta came to the attention of US authorities on several occasions in the course of 2001. In January he was allowed to reenter the United States after a trip to Germany, despite the fact that he was in violation of his visa status. He landed in Miami January 10 on a flight from Madrid, on a tourist visa, although he told immigration inspectors that he was taking flying lessons in the US, for which an M-1 student visa is required. Jeanne Butterfield, executive director of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, told the *Washington Post*, "Nine times out of 10, they would have told him to go back and file [for that status] overseas. You're not supposed to come in as a visitor for pleasure and go to work or school." The recipient of this indulgent treatment, it must be emphasized, had previously been under FBI surveillance for stockpiling bomb-making materials! (Source: *Washington Post*, October 28, 2001)

According to a report on Canadian television, Atta had been implicated in a terrorist bombing in Israel and the information passed on to the United States before he was first issued a tourist visa. (Source: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, September 14, 2001, reported by Diana Swain from Vero Beach, Florida)

Atta made other trips to Europe, returning to Germany in May and visiting Spain in July, each time returning to the United States and being admitted by US customs and immigration. Another British press report notes that Atta "was under surveillance between January and May last year after he was reportedly observed buying large quantities of chemicals in Frankfurt, apparently for the production of explosives and for biological warfare. The US agents reported to have trailed Atta are said to have failed to inform the German authorities about their investigation. The disclosure that Atta was being trailed by police long before 11 September raises the question why the attacks could not have been prevented with the man's arrest." (Source: *The Observer*, September 30, 2001)

During the summer of 2001, Atta received a wire transfer of \$100,000 from an account in Pakistan allegedly controlled by a representative of Osama bin Laden. This transfer has been cited repeatedly by US officials as proof that bin Laden inspired the September 11 attacks, but they have not explained how such a large sum of money could be transmitted with impunity to someone under FBI surveillance. Another remarkable fact: according to an Indian newspaper, the man who actually authorized the wire transfer to Atta was General Mahmud Ahmed, head of the Pakistani intelligence agency ISI, the principal sponsor of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Ahmed was forced to resign after India made his role public and it was confirmed by the FBI. Coincidentally or not, Ahmed was in Washington, DC on September 11, for consultations with American intelligence officials. (Source: CNN report, October 1, 2001; *The Times of India*, October 11, 2001).



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