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Correcting the Record on Sept. 11, in Great Detail

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WASHINGTON, July 24 — When the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States set to work early last year to prepare the definitive history of the events of Sept. 11, 2001, it seemed that much of the hard work of the so-called 9/11 commission was already done, because so much of the horrifying story seemed to be known.

At the time, it was understood that all of the hijackers had entered the country legally and done nothing to draw attention to themselves; Osama bin Laden had underwritten the plot with his personal fortune but had left the details to others; American intelligence agencies had no warning that Al Qaeda was considering suicide missions using planes; President Bush had received a special intelligence briefing weeks before Sept. 11 about Al Qaeda threats that focused on past, not current, threats.

But 19 months later, the commission released a final, unanimous book-length report last Thursday that, in calling for a overhaul of the way the government collects and shares intelligence, showed that much of what had been common wisdom about the Sept. 11 attacks at the start of the panel's investigation was wrong.

In meticulous detail, the 567-page report, including 116 pages of detailed footnotes in tiny, eye-straining type, rewrote the history of Sept. 11, 2001, correcting the historical record in ways large and small and shattering myths that might otherwise have been accepted as truth for generations.

The commission's report found that the hijackers had repeatedly broken the law in entering the United States, that Mr. bin Laden may have micromanaged the attacks but did not pay for them, that intelligence agencies had considered the threat of suicide hijackings, and that Mr. Bush received an August 2001 briefing on evidence of continuing domestic terrorist threats from Al Qaeda.

"Our work, we believe, is the definitive work on 9/11," said Thomas H. Kean, the former Republican governor of New Jersey who was chairman of the commission, and whose consensus-building talents are credited by other commissioners as the reason the panel's report was unanimous. If there are unanswered questions, Mr. Kean said, it is mostly because "the people who were at the heart of the plot are dead."

The Hijackers

For the commission of five Democrats and five Republicans, the work of correcting the record began with an understanding of how 19 young Arab terrorists managed to enter the United States unnoticed, hiding in plain sight in the weeks and months before they joined in an attack that left more than 3,000 people dead.

This was the subject of the first of what would be series of riveting public hearings held by the commission this year. The first fact-finding hearing in January showed just how wrong - and self-serving - much of the government's information about the Sept. 11 plot had been. And it suggested just how aggressive the commission intended to be in setting the record straight.

Immediately after Sept. 11 and in the months that followed, the F.B.I., the C.I.A. and other counterterrorism agencies defended their failure to detect the plot by insisting that the hijackers had gone out of their way to enter the United States legally and to avoid detection in the months preceding the attacks.

"Each of the hijackers, apparently purposely selected to avoid notice, came easily and lawfully from abroad," Louis J. Freeh, the former director of the F.B.I., testified to Congress in October 2002. "While here, the hijackers effectively operated without suspicion, triggering nothing that alerted law enforcement."

But in its final report, the commission found that as many as 13 of the hijackers had entered the United States with passports that had been fraudulently altered, using criminal methods previously associated with Al Qaeda.

The commission found that the visa applications of many of the hijackers had been filled out improperly; in several cases, the hijackers had provided demonstrably false information on the forms. The names of at least three of the terrorists were found after Sept. 11 in the databases of American intelligence and counterterrorism agencies.

After entering the United States, several of the hijackers should have drawn the attention of law enforcement agencies but did not.

Mohamed Atta, the plot's Egyptian-born ringleader, overstayed his tourist visa. One of the terrorist pilots, Ziad al-Jarrah, attended school in 2000 in violation of his immigration status, which should have been enough to block him from re-entering the United States; he left and re-entered the country at least six more times before Sept. 11.

Imagining the Unimaginable

In trying to explain why the nation had left itself so vulnerable on Sept. 11, the leaders of the nation's law enforcement and intelligence agencies have insisted publicly that they never considered the nightmare of passenger planes turned into guided missiles.

"I don't think anybody could have predicted that these people would take an airplane and slam it into the World Trade Center," Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's national security adviser, said in May 2002. As recently as this April, in testimony to the Sept. 11 commission, Mr. Freeh said that he "never was aware of a plan that contemplated commercial airliners being used as weapons."

But in its investigation, the commission found that an attack described as unimaginable had in fact been imagined, repeatedly. The commission said that several threat reports circulated within the government in the late 1990's raised the explicit possibility of an attack using airliners as missiles.

Most prominent among those reports, the commission said, was one circulated in September 1998, based on information provided by a source who walked into an American consulate in East Asia, that "mentioned a possible plot to fly an explosives-laden aircraft into a U.S. city." In August of the same year, it said, an intelligence agency received information that a group of Libyans hoped to crash a plane into the World Trade Center.

The North American Aerospace Defense Command had gone so far as to develop exercises to counter the threat and, according to a Defense Department memorandum unearthed by the commission, planned a drill in April 2001 that would have simulated a terrorist crash into the Pentagon.

Bin Laden's Role

American intelligence agencies had known for years that the United States had much to fear from Osama bin Laden, but it was fear based more on Mr. bin Laden's power as a global symbol of Islamic fundamentalist rage than as a terrorist logistician.

A senior State Department official testified to the Senate in 2001 that the bin Laden terror network was "analogous to a multinational corporation, bin Laden as C.E.O.," leaving the details of the terrorist attacks to others.

But the commission found that far from being the disengaged leader of his terror network, Mr. bin Laden was described by captured Qaeda colleagues as a hands-on executive who wanted to be involved in almost every detail of the Sept. 11 plot, choosing the hijacking team himself and selecting targets. He was reported to have been eager to hit the White House.

The report describes information obtained from the interrogation of Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, Mr. bin Laden's former chief of operations, who said that "bin Laden could assess new trainees very quickly, in about 10 minutes, and that many of the 9/11 hijackers were selected in this manner."

American intelligence analysts had long believed that Mr. bin Laden had a vast personal fortune that bankrolled Al Qaeda; news accounts described the bin Laden fortune as totaling as much as \$300 million, with real estate holdings in London, Paris and the Côte d'Azur.

But the commission reached a far different conclusion, finding that Mr. bin Laden was cut off from his family's wealth after the early 1990's and that he financed Al Qaeda's operations through a core group of wealthy Muslim donors, mainly in the Persian Gulf. The report said that from 1970 to 1994, Mr. bin Laden received about \$1 million a year from family funds - a sizable sum, but not nearly enough to finance such an ambitious terrorist network.

The Iraq Connection

The Bush administration has long maintained that there was a close working relationship between Al Qaeda and Iraq. In October 2002, with the invasion of Iraq only months away, President Bush said in a speech in Cincinnati that "high-level contacts" between Iraq and Al Qaeda "go back a decade," and that "we've learned that Iraq has trained Al Qaeda members in bomb-making and poisons and deadly gases."

As recently as last month, Vice President Dick Cheney said there was reason to believe a disputed Czech intelligence report that Mohamed Atta had met with a senior Iraqi intelligence officer in Prague in April 2001, suggesting a tie between Iraq and the Sept. 11 plot.

But in its most contentious effort to set the record straight about the origins of the plot, the bipartisan commission's final report found no evidence of close collaboration between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, appearing to undermine a justification for the Iraq war.

The commission found no credible evidence to suggest that the Prague meeting took place and no evidence of any kind to show Iraqi involvement in attacks by Al Qaeda against the United States. While there had indeed been periodic contacts in the late 1990's between Al Qaeda representatives and Iraqi officials, principally in Sudan, the commission found, those contacts did not amount to much.

"To date we have seen no evidence that these or the earlier contacts ever developed into a collaborative operational relationship," the commission wrote.

A footnote buried on page 470 of the commission's report provided a clue to some of the false claims: "Although there have been suggestions of contacts between Iraq and Al Qaeda regarding chemical weapons and explosive trainings, the most detailed information alleging such ties came from an Al Qaeda operative who recanted much of his original information."

The commission attempted to lift suspicion that the leaders of another Arab government, that of Saudi Arabia, had underwritten Al Qaeda, and to knock down widely circulated theories that the Bush administration had improperly assisted the Saudis by allowing members of the extended bin Laden clan to flee the United States on charter flights at a time when all commercial air traffic was shut down after the attacks.

"Saudi Arabia has long been considered the principal source of Al Qaeda financing," the commission wrote in its final report. "But we have found no evidence that the Saudi government as an institution or senior Saudi officials individually funded the organization."

The Evidence

In the first hours after the Sept. 11 attacks and ever since, the White House has consistently insisted that President Bush and his deputies had no credible evidence before the attacks to suggest that Al Qaeda was about to strike on American soil.

But the assertion has been questioned as a result of the commission's digging. After its most heated showdown with the Bush administration over access to classified information, the commission pressured the White House to declassify and make public a special intelligence briefing that had been presented to the president at his Texas ranch on Aug. 6, 2001, a month before the attacks.

The existence of the document - but not its detailed contents - had been known about since 2002, when the White House confirmed news reports that President Bush had received an intelligence report before Sept. 11 warning of the possibility that Al Qaeda might hijack American passenger planes.

In testimony this April to the Sept. 11 commission, before it was made public, Ms. Rice insisted that the report was "historical."

"It did not, in fact, warn of attacks inside the United States," she testified. "It was historical information based on old reporting. There was no new threat information."

But there were gasps in the audience in the hearing room when she disclosed the name of the two-page briefing paper: "Bin Laden Determined to Attack in U.S."

The document was made public several days later and contained passages referring to F.B.I. reports of "suspicious activity in this country consistent with preparations for hijackings or other types of attacks, including recent surveillance of federal buildings in New York." It noted that a caller to the United States Embassy in the United Arab Emirates that May had warned that "a group of bin Laden supporters was in the U.S.," planning attacks with explosives.

The commission's final report revealed that two C.I.A. analysts involved in preparing the brief had wanted to make clear to Mr. Bush that, far from being only a historical threat, the threat that Al Qaeda would strike on American soil was "both current and serious."