

Former Counterterrorism Czar Accuses Tenet, Other CIA Officials of Cover-Up

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With the tenth anniversary of 9/11 just a month away, the intelligence failures leading up to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have started to attract fresh scrutiny from former counterterrorism officials, who have called into question the veracity of the official government narrative that concluded who knew what and when. Indeed, recently Truthout published an [exclusive report](#) based on documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act and an interview with a former high-ranking counterterrorism official that showed how a little-known military intelligence unit, unbeknownst to the various investigative bodies probing the terrorist attacks, was ordered by senior government officials to stop tracking Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda's movements prior to 9/11.

And now, in a stunning new interview made available to Truthout that is scheduled to [air](#) on a local PBS affiliate in Colorado tonight, former counterterrorism czar Richard Clarke, for the first time, levels explosive allegations against three former top CIA officials - George Tenet, Cofer Black and Richard Blee - accusing them of knowingly withholding intelligence from the Bush and Clinton White House, the FBI, Immigration and the State and Defense Departments about two of the 9/11 hijackers who had entered the United States more than a year before the attacks. Moreover, Clarke says the former CIA officials likely engaged in a cover-up by withholding key details about two of the hijackers from the 9/11 Commission.

"They've been able to get through a joint House investigation committee and get through the 9/11 Commission and this has never come out," Clarke said about Blee, Tenet and Black. "They got away with it."

Clarke, who now runs the security firm [Good Harbor Consulting](#), was the chief counterterrorism adviser for the Clinton and Bush administrations, who famously testified before the 9/11 Commission probing the terrorist attacks that "your government failed you."

In October 2009, he spoke to John Duffy and Ray Nowosielski, who have been working on a documentary about Blee and the secrecy surrounding his role in the intelligence failures leading up to 9/11, which is set to air on the tenth anniversary of the attacks. Duffy and Nowosielski, whose previous film, "[Press For Truth](#)," followed four 9/11 widows as they lobbied the Bush White House to convene an independent commission to probe the attacks, have also launched a new transparency web site, [SecrecyKills.com](#), set to go live this evening with a campaign aimed at further unmasking Blee.

Clarke did not respond to questions about whether he still stood behind the comments he made about Tenet, Black, Blee nearly two years ago, which he admits he doesn't have evidence to back up. But Nowosielski told Truthout he spoke to Clarke last week to inform

him that Tenet, Black and Blee had issued a joint statement that was highly critical of his charges, and Clarke told Nowosielski he has not changed his position.

Clarke asserts in the 13-minute interview that Tenet, the former CIA director; Black, who headed the agency's Counterterrorist Center; and [Blee](#), a top aide to Tenet who led the CIA's Bin Laden Issues Station, also known as Alec Station, whose true identity was [revealed for the first time](#) two years ago, are to blame for the government's failure to capture Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar, who hijacked American Airlines Flight 77 with three other terrorists and flew the jetliner directly into the Pentagon killing 189 people.

COMPLETE INTERVIEW

"George Tenet followed all of the information about al-Qaeda in microscopic detail," Clarke told Duffy and Nowosielski. "He read raw intelligence reports before analysts in the counterterrorism center did and he would pick up the phone and call me at 7:30 in the morning and talk about them."

But Tenet, who was awarded the Medal of Freedom by George W. Bush in 2004, did not share what Clarke says he knew about the al-Hazmi and the al-Mihdhar case.

In early January 2000, CIA analysts were informed by the National Security Agency that al-Hamzi and al-Mihdhar were heading to a meeting of other al-Qaeda associates in Malaysia, their travel arranged by Osama bin Laden's Yemen operations center. The CIA surveilled the meeting and took photographs of the men.

From Malaysia, al-Hazmi, al-Mihdhar and Walid bin Attash, the alleged mastermind behind the USS Cole bombing, traveled to Thailand, which the CIA reported to Alec Station in a cable. Al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar then boarded a flight bound for Los Angeles, arriving in the city on January 15, 2000.

The CIA had claimed, according to the 9/11 Commission report, that they lost track of all three men in Thailand. Despite being aware that the terrorists had already obtained tourist visas, the agency still failed to notify the FBI and State Department for inclusion on the latter's terrorist watch list. Remarkably, Mihdhar left Southern California for Yemen in June 2000 and, using a new passport, returned to the US undetected on July 4, 2001.

Clarke suggests that if the CIA had shared intelligence about al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar with him, the FBI, and others, then perhaps the attack on the Pentagon could have been thwarted. As he noted in his book, "[Your Government Failed You: Breaking the Cycle of National Security Disasters](#)," the 9/11 Commission never fleshed out the rationale behind the CIA's failure to share crucial intelligence information about al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar with other officials and government agencies.

"As jaded and cynical as I am about government failures, I still find this one mind-boggling and inexplicable," Clarke wrote. "The 9/11 Commission report does not tell us very much about how or why it happened and their explanations, while they could be correct, strain credulity and leave many questions unanswered."

"Failure to Communicate"

One of the CIA officials who had been monitoring the Malaysia meeting was a young al-Qaeda analyst named Jennifer Matthews, who had been working with the Bin Laden Issues Station since its inception in 1996. Another analyst, who worked closely with Matthews, was a red-headed woman who, in recent years, has been at the center of a scandal involving the torture and wrongful rendition of at least one detainee. She has since been promoted and continues to work for the CIA on al-Qaeda-related issues. An agency spokesman requested that Truthout not print her name because her identity is classified.

In his recently published book, "[Triple Agent](#)," Washington Post reporter Joby Warrick wrote that former CIA Inspector General John Helgerson probed "CIA missteps that had allowed" al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar "to enter the United States undetected."

"Helgerson concluded that the CIA's Counterterrorism Center had failed to respond to a series of cabled warnings in 2000 about" al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar "who later became part of the September 11 plot ...," Warrick wrote. "The cables were seen by as many as sixty CIA employees, yet the two operatives' names were never passed along to the FBI, which might have assigned agents to track them down or shared with the State Department, which could have flagged their names on its watch list. In theory, the arrest of either man could have led investigators to the other hijackers and the eventual unraveling of the 9/11 plot.

"Helgerson's report named individual managers who it said bore the greatest responsibility for failing to ensure that vital information was passed to the FBI. The report, never released in full, also recommended that some of the managers be reviewed for possible disciplinary action ... Jennifer Matthews was on that list."

Matthews, who Warrick also says led the agency's search for the first high-value detainee, Abu Zubaydah, and who was also present at the CIA black site prison in Thailand when Zubaydah was waterboarded after he was captured in March 2002, was among seven CIA officers killed in Khost, Afghanistan, in a December 2009 suicide bombing at Forward Operating Base Chapman in Afghanistan, which Matthews was chief of.

"A High-Level Decision"

Although Helgerson's report recommended Matthews be disciplined, Clarke does not believe she or the dozens of other CIA analysts bear the ultimate responsibility for failing to inform the US government for 18 months that al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar were in the US.

"It's not as I originally thought, which was that one lonely CIA analyst got this information and didn't somehow recognize the significance of it," Clarke said during the interview. "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."

Still, Clarke said his position as National Coordinator for Security and Information meant he should have received a briefing from CIA about al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar, explaining "unless somebody intervened to stop the normal automatic distribution I would automatically get it."

"For me to this day, 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,” Clarke said.

How high level?

“I would think it would have to be made by the director,” Clarke said. “You gotta understand my relationship with [Tenet], we were close friends, he called me several times a day, we shared the most trivial of information with each other, there was not a lack of information sharing, [CIA] told us everything except this.”

So, what happened? Why did the CIA fail to share its intelligence about al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar with Clarke and other government officials? Clarke believes the CIA may have attempted to “flip” al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar, but ultimately failed.

That’s an allegation that surfaced in Lawrence Wright’s groundbreaking book, [“The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and The Road to 9/11.”](#) Wright, who interviewed Clarke for his book, said a team of FBI investigators and federal prosecutors known as [Squad I-49](#) came to believe that the CIA “was shielding Mihdhar and Hazmi because it hoped to recruit them”

“The CIA was desperate for a source inside al-Qaeda; it had completely failed to penetrate the inner circle or even to place a willing partner in the training camps, which were largely open to anyone who showed up,” Wright wrote. “Mihdhar and Hazmi must have seemed like attractive opportunities however, once they entered the United States they were the province of the FBI. The CIA had no legal authority to operate inside the country ... It is also possible, as some FBI investigators suspect, the CIA was running a joint venture with Saudi intelligence in order to get around that restriction ... These are only theories about the CIA’s failures to communicate vital information to the bureau ... Perhaps the agency decided that Saudi intelligence would have a better chance of recruiting these men than the Americans. That would leave no CIA fingerprints on the operation as well.

“This is the view of some very bitter FBI investigators, who wonder why they were never informed of the existence of al-Qaeda operatives inside America. Mihdhar and Hazmi arrived nineteen months before 9/11. The FBI had all the authority it needed to investigate these men and learn what they were up to, but because the CIA had failed to divulge the presence of two active members of al-Qaeda, the hijackers were free to develop their plot until it was too late to stop them.”

The 9/11 Commission was unable to substantiate claims that the CIA tried to recruit al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar.

“Reckless and Profoundly Wrong”

In response to Clarke’s charges, Tenet, Black and Blee issued a joint statement to Duffy and Nowosielski last week upon learning their interview with Clarke would soon air publicly. The former CIA officials admonished their former colleague, stating his comments were “reckless and profoundly wrong.” Blee’s inclusion in the joint statement marks the first time he has spoken publicly about the events leading up to 9/11.

“Clarke starts with the presumption that important information on the travel of future hijackers to the United States was intentionally withheld from him in early 2000,” the former CIA officials said. “It was not. He wildly speculates that it must have been the CIA Director who could have ordered the information withheld. There was no such order. In fact, the

record shows that the Director and other senior CIA officials were unaware of the information until after 9/11.”

“In early 2000, a number of more junior personnel (including FBI agents on detail to CIA) did see travel information on individuals who later became hijackers but the significance of the data was not adequately recognized at the time ... Building on his false notion that information was intentionally withheld, Mr. Clarke went on to speculate – which he admits is based on nothing other than his imagination – that the CIA might have been trying to recruit these two future hijackers as agents. This, like much of what Mr. Clarke said in his interview, is utterly without foundation. We testified under oath about what we did, what we knew and what we didn’t know. We stand by that testimony.”

“We Would Have Found Those Assholes”

But Clarke says even as early as July 2001 – two months before the terrorist attacks – when Tenet and Blee called an urgent meeting with President Bush at the White House, they had an opportunity to disclose the fact that al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar were somewhere in the US, but failed to disclose what they knew.

The CIA waited until late August to inform lower-level FBI agents that al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar were in the US and were likely planning an attack inside the US. Yet, the CIA continued to conceal the intelligence from senior FBI and Bush administration officials a week prior to the attacks.

Clarke said there’s a “very obvious answer” as to why the CIA continued, as early as September 4, 2001, in a meeting attended by Clarke and other senior Bush administration officials, to withhold intelligence about the two hijackers: to protect the agency from scrutiny.

“I know how all this stuff works I’ve been working it for 30 years,” Clarke said. “You can’t snowball me on this stuff. If they announce on September 4 in the Principals meeting that these guys are in the United States and they told the FBI a few weeks ago I’m going to say ‘wait, time out. How long have you known this? Why haven’t you reported it at the daily threat meetings? Why isn’t it in the daily threat matrix?’ We would have begun an investigation that day into CIA malfeasance and misfeasance that’s why we’re not informed.”

Clarke added that even if the CIA had disclosed what it knew about al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar as late as September 4, 2001, he believes the FBI could have captured the men and dismantled their plans to attack the Pentagon.

“We would have conducted a massive sweep,” Clarke said. “We would have conducted publicly. We would have found those assholes. There’s no doubt in my mind. Even with only a week left.”

Truthout contributor Jeffrey Kaye contributed to this report.

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