

Part 2 of a four-part series

September 11: The circumstantial case

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The Pipeline

April 19, 2002—In 1997, two things of note happened in Texas. Representatives of the Taliban, which had recently consolidated its power over most of Afghanistan, came to Houston. They were wined and dined by Unocal, one of the largest energy firms in the United States. Also, the governor of Texas, George W. Bush, was pushing legislation which would allow him to store all of his gubernatorial papers at his father's presidential library, away from the archivists in Austin, and be protected by the Federal Freedom of Information Act rather than Texas state law.

Unocal was hoping to construct an ambitious pipeline project which would transport Central Asian oil to the Arabian Sea. Central Asia has what is estimated to be 30 percent of the world's proven oil reserves, second only to the Persian Gulf. Dick Cheney, who at the time was president of Halliburton, was quoted in 1998 as saying, "I cannot think of a time when we have had a region emerge as suddenly to become as strategically important as the Caspian."

In 1998 after the U.S. Embassy bombings, talks with the Taliban were broken off. Then came the attack on the USS Cole. President Clinton ordered a cruise missile attack on al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan. Despite a connection with al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden's shadowy terrorist organization, the FBI's chief anti-terrorism investigator was prevented from properly investigating the attack on the Cole. John O'Neill complained publicly that American and Saudi oil interests prevented him from tracking down or properly investigating Osama bin Laden and his network. He later resigned in protest.

Relations with the Taliban got considerably warmer after George W. Bush came to office. With a cabinet of former oil executives and consultants, and bankrolled largely by energy companies, such as Enron, Bush wanted to try to get negotiations back on track.

Much of what happened in those negotiations has been revealed by a book published in France, entitled "*Bin Laden: La Verite Interdite*" (*Bin Laden: The Forbidden Truth*). Its authors are former French intelligence agent Jean-Charles Brisard and investigative journalist Guillaume Dasque. They claim that the United States was negotiating with the Taliban up until August, just before the attacks. According to the authors, in August, only one month before the attacks, one of the negotiators warned the Taliban with the words, "either accept our offer of a carpet of gold, or we'll bury you in a carpet of bombs." If their allegations are true, the words would prove an eerily accurate prediction of the future.

In May 2001, as reported in the *Los Angeles Times*, the Bush administration gave the Taliban government \$43 million dollars, ostensibly to offset farmers' losses for destroying their opium crops in the War on Drugs. This was at a time when only three governments in the world recognized the Taliban.

Pre-planning?

According to several British newspapers, the U.S. was planning military action against Afghanistan well before September 11.

In an interview with the BBC, Niaz Naik, a former Pakistani diplomat and foreign secretary, said that he was told by senior American officials in mid-July that the U.S. was already planning an attack against Afghanistan. He received this information at a UN sponsored conference on Afghanistan in Berlin. This would seem to corroborate the "carpet of gold, carpet of bombs" speech claimed by the French authors. According to the BBC, Mr. Naik claimed that the U.S. objective was to capture bin Laden and install a moderate, Western-friendly government in Afghanistan. He added that the attack would take place from bases in Tajikistan, where military advisors were already in place, and that it would occur by mid-October at the latest.

The presence of the military in Central Asia is confirmed by the British newspaper *The Guardian*. According to it, a U.S. department of defense official, Dr. Jeffrey Starr, visited Tajikistan in January, and U.S. Rangers were training special troops in Kyrgyzstan. The head of the current Afghan war, General Tommy Franks, visited Dushanbe on May 16, 2001, calling Tajikistan "a strategically significant country."

This does not, by itself, indicate any guilt. It is entirely possible that the United States had tired of bin Laden's games, and decided to eliminate the danger once and for all. It is possible bin Laden got wind of this and decided to launch a preemptive strike. It would be an amazing coincidence, however, if the U.S. had planned to attack Afghanistan last October no matter what, and then terrorists loyal to bin Laden committed the worst terrorist atrocity in world history upon New York City only one month prior to the scheduled assault. A pre-emptive strike? Perhaps. But the pilots had been training at U.S. flight schools for more than a year by that time.

One thing is clear, O'Neill isn't talking. He was killed at the World Trade Center on September 11, where had become the new chief of security in July 2001.

Secrecy

Bush's attempt to hide his gubernatorial papers in Texas by making them federal property was noted above. The arrangement is especially convenient now that Bush has since made it more difficult to obtain records under the Freedom of Information Act. What's interesting is that he started the process in 1997, just as Unocal's negotiations with the Taliban were gathering steam.

Bush's penchant for secrecy doesn't stop there, however. Shortly after coming to power, he used an obscure executive order to block the release of papers from the Reagan and Bush I administration. He later issued an executive order that would block the release of presidential records if *either* the current or former occupant of the White House wished them to not be released, potentially forever, effectively undermining the Presidential Records Act passed in the wake of the Watergate scandal.

Why was this action taken? Furthermore, why was the groundwork for it being laid prior to September 11? The claim of national security makes no sense, as the papers that are scheduled for release are 12 years old. Furthermore, why is it necessary to have the ability to block papers *even if the former president wants them released*? Many consider this an attempt to protect officials involved in the Iran-Contra scandal, which include many members of the current administration as well as the current president's own father.

When an open-meeting law prevented Bush's Social Security commission from meeting privately, the group split into two so the law would not apply. And then, of course, there are the documents relating to the vice president's energy commission, which the Congress is suing to get a look at in the wake of Enron's collapse. Dick Cheney is keeping the records secret, and is threatening to fight all the way to the Supreme Court. Why is he taking such a politically damaging position? According to him, he fears future presidents would no longer get sound advice if the details of such meetings can't be kept secret. But with so many demonstrated connections between Bush, the energy industry, and Afghanistan, is there something more?

Cheney Asks Daschle to Back Off

Last January 22, Cheney made a rare private phone call to Senate Majority leader Tom Daschle, asking him to back off the investigation into the September attacks. Daschle refused. The following Tuesday in a private meeting, George W. Bush made the same request. According to Daschle's memory of the call, Cheney claimed "a review of what happened on September 11 would take resources and personnel away from the effort in the war on terrorism." Concerning Bush and Cheney's requests, CNN reported, "Although the president and vice president told Daschle they were worried a wide-reaching inquiry could distract from the government's war on terrorism, privately Democrats questioned why the White House feared a broader investigation to determine possible culpability."

Why was Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle asked personally by the executive branch to back off from the investigation surrounding September 11? What possible motive could there be to not explore, from every possible angle, this vicious attack on American soil? The vice president's suggestion that "it would take resources away from the war on terrorism" is absurd. There can be nothing more important than finding out how this happened to make sure it never happens again. Yet, both the president and vice president asked that the investigation be limited. Why?

Other Relevant Facts

George W. Bush made his first million with an oil company called Arbusto Oil. One of the investors was the head of the bin Ladin family business and Osama's brother, Salem bin Laden. The bin Ladin Group was also an investor in the American banking and defense firm, the Carlyle Group, which employs the father of the current president, George H.W. Bush, as well as former President Reagan's Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci and Reagan's Secretary of State James A. Baker III.

Before the attacks, the Taliban hired Laila Helms, niece of former CIA director Richard Helms, to be its public relations liaison with the U.S. government.

MSNBC reported that just two weeks before the attack, a radio station in the Cayman Islands received an unsigned letter warning of a major terrorist attack against the U.S. via an airline or airlines. The letter was forwarded to the government where it sat until after the attacks. Although it was reported that government officials went to the island to investigate, nothing has been heard since. While no evidence exists that the terrorist hijackers went to the Cayman Islands, it is known as an international banking haven.

The FBI is still withholding the transcripts and information from the black box and flight recorder of United Flight 93 that crashed in Pennsylvania.

Next:

In Part 3, we look at the pattern of behavior by the Bush administration, both before and after the attacks.

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