

Sept. 11: What you really ought to know

By Greg Palast
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On November 9, 2001, when you could still choke on the dust in the air near Ground Zero, BBC Television received a call in London from a top-level US intelligence agent. He was not happy. Shortly after George W. Bush took office, he told us reluctantly, the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and the FBI, “were told to back off the Saudis.”

We knew that. In the newsroom, we had a document already in hand, marked, “SECRET” across the top and “199-I” – meaning this was a national security matter.

The secret memo released agents to hunt down two member of the bin Laden family operating a “suspected terrorist organization” in the USA. It was dated September 13, 2001 – two days too late for too many. What the memo indicates, corroborated by other sources, was that the agents had long wanted to question these characters ... but could not until after the attack. By that time, these bin Laden birds had flown their American nest.

Back to the high-level agent. I pressed him to tell me exactly which investigations were spiked. None of this interview dance was easy, requiring switching to untraceable phones. Ultimately, the insider said, “Khan Labs.” At the time, our intelligence agencies were on the trail of Pakistan’s Dr. Strangelove, A.Q. Khan, who built Pakistan’s bomb and was selling its secrets to the Libyans. But once Bush and Condoleeza Rice’s team took over, the source told us, agents were forced to let a hot trail go cold. Specifically, there were limits on tracing the Saudi money behind this “Islamic bomb.”

Then we made another call, this time to an arms dealer in the Mideast. He confirmed that his partner attended a meeting in 1995 at the 5-star Hotel Royale Monceau in Paris where, allegedly, Saudi billionaires agreed to fund Al Qaeda fanatics. We understood it to be protection money, not really a sign of support for their attacks. Nevertheless, rule number one of investigative reporting is “follow the money” – but the sheiks’ piggy banks were effectively off-limits to the US agents during the Bush years. One of the men in the posh hotel’s meeting of vipers happens to have been a Bush family business associate.

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Before you jump to the wrong conclusion, let me tell you that we found no evidence – none, zero, no kidding – that George Bush knew about Al Qaeda’s plan to attack on September 11. Indeed, the grim joke at BBC is that anyone accusing George Bush of knowing anything at all must have solid evidence. This is not a story of what George Bush knew but rather of his very-unfunny ignorance. And it was not stupidity, but policy: no asking Saudis uncomfortable questions about their paying off roving packs of killers, especially when those Saudis are so generous to Bush family businesses.

Yes, Bill Clinton was also a bit too tender towards the oil men of Arabia. But this you should know. In his last year in office, Clinton sent two delegations to the Gulf to suggest that the Royal family crack down on “charitable donations” from their kingdom to the guys who blew up our embassies.

But when a failed Texas oil man took over the White House in January 2001, demands on the Saudis to cut off terror funding simply stopped.

And what about the bin Laden “suspected terrorist organization”? Called the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, the group sponsors soccer teams and summer camps in Florida. BBC obtained a video of one camp activity, a speech exhorting kids on the heroism of suicide bombings and hostage takings. While WAMY draws membership with wholesome activities, it has also acted as a cover or front, say the Dutch, Indian and Bosnian governments, for the recruitment of jihadi killers.

Certainly, it was worth asking the bin Laden boys a few questions. But the FBI agents couldn’t, until it was too late.

In November 2001, when BBC ran the report on the spike of investigations of Saudi funding of terror in November 2001, the Bush defenders whom we’d invited to respond on air dismissed the concerns of lower level FBI agents who’d passed over the WAMY documents. No action was taken on the group headed by the bin Ladens.

Then, in May this year, fifty FBI agents surrounded, invaded and sealed off WAMY’s Virginia office. It was like a bad scene out of the ‘Untouchables.’ The raid took place three years after our report and long after the bin Ladens had waved bye-bye, it is not surprising that the feds seized mostly empty files and a lot of soccer balls.

Why now this belated move on the bin Laden’s former operation? Why not right after the September 11 attack? This year’s FBI raid occurred just days after an Islamist terror assault in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Apparently, messin’ with the oil sheiks gets this Administration’s attention. Falling towers in New York are only for Republican convention photo ops.

The 199-I memo was passed to BBC television by the sleuths at the National Security News Service in Washington. We authenticated it, added in our own sleuthing, then gave

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the FBI its say, expecting the usual, "It's baloney, a fake." But we didn't get the usual response. Rather, FBI headquarters said, "There are lots of things the intelligence community knows and other people ought not to know."

Ought not to know?

What else ought we not to know, Mr. President? And when are we supposed to forget it?

Greg Palast's reports for BBC Television Newsnight and The Guardian paper of Britain (with David Pallister) on White House interference in the investigation of terrorism won a 2002 California State University Journalism School 'Project Censored' Award. The BBC television reports, expanded and updated, will be released this month in the USA as a DVD, "Bush Family Fortunes," produced by BBC's Meirion Jones. View a 2-minute preview at <http://www.gregpalast.com/bff-dvd.htm>