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U.S. Clamps Secrecy on Warnings Before 9/11

August 7, 2003

It's not just the Saudi secret that's being kept.

The recent report of the joint congressional committee that probed intelligence failures before the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon reveals what the Bush administration doesn't want Americans to know about the American government.

You would not know this from media accounts about this report. They have dwelled on what the Bush administration doesn't want us to know about the Saudi government.

This is the famous 28-page chapter, a series of blank lines across page after page, that the president refuses to declassify despite the pleadings of the bipartisan group of lawmakers and the Saudi government itself.

The dustup over Saudi secrets is exquisitely convenient. It obscures George W. Bush's relentless hold on U.S. secrets and on information he maintains should be secret, though it has not necessarily been before now.

The report's appendix hints at what these secrets are, and why they are kept. "Access Limitations Encountered by the Joint Inquiry," the section is titled.

The White House refused to provide contents of the president's daily brief. This would clear up questions about how much specific information President Bush received about an impending attack during the spring and summer of 2001 - a period in which the intelligence community was reporting with alarm that a "spectacular" attack against the United States involving "mass casualties" was in the works.

"Ultimately, this bar was extended to the point where CIA personnel were not allowed to be interviewed regarding the simple process by which the (brief) is prepared," the panel said.

The committee managed, "inadvertently," it says, to get some contents of a key briefing Bush received in August 2001. It included "FBI judgments about patterns of activity consistent with preparations for hijackings or other types of attacks; as well as information acquired in May 2001 that indicated a group of Bin Ladin (sic) supporters was planning attacks in the United States with explosives." In an extraordinary footnote, the panel cites public statements by National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice that characterized the August briefing as general and having provided historical perspective on Osama bin Laden's methods of terror.

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The lawmakers, though, were barred from interviewing Rice. They sought to "obtain a better understanding of the development of counterterrorism policy in the Bush administration before September 11, 2001." The panel was forced to submit written questions to a deputy.

Lawmakers also were barred from getting information on an intelligence reform commission chaired by former National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft. The Scowcroft commission's findings already had been widely reported in the press.

The administration blocked the congressional investigators from obtaining information showing how intelligence agency funding requests were handled by the White House budget office, dating back to the Reagan administration. The lawmakers were kept from interviewing an FBI informant who had contact with two of the Sept. 11 hijackers while they were living in San Diego.

Not once, but twice, the panel was forced to tangle in court with the Justice Department over information about its handling of Zacarias Moussaoui.

Moussaoui was detained nearly a month before the attack and now is charged as the "20th hijacker." The Justice Department argued, to no avail, that Congress is covered by a local rule in Virginia, where the Moussaoui case is being heard, that bars prosecutors and defense lawyers from making out-of-court statements. The rule contains explicit language stating that it doesn't cover "hearings or the lawful issuance of reports" by legislative or investigative bodies.

The inquiry's report devotes 15 pages to describing a pattern of Bush administration denials and delaying tactics that prevented a fuller account of national failure before the attack. Last month the independent 9/11 commission still probing the attack issued a similar compendium of complaint.

Worry, if you will, about those 28 pages involving the Saudi sheiks. But a deeper, darker problem is our own government's refusal to fill in the blanks about itself.

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