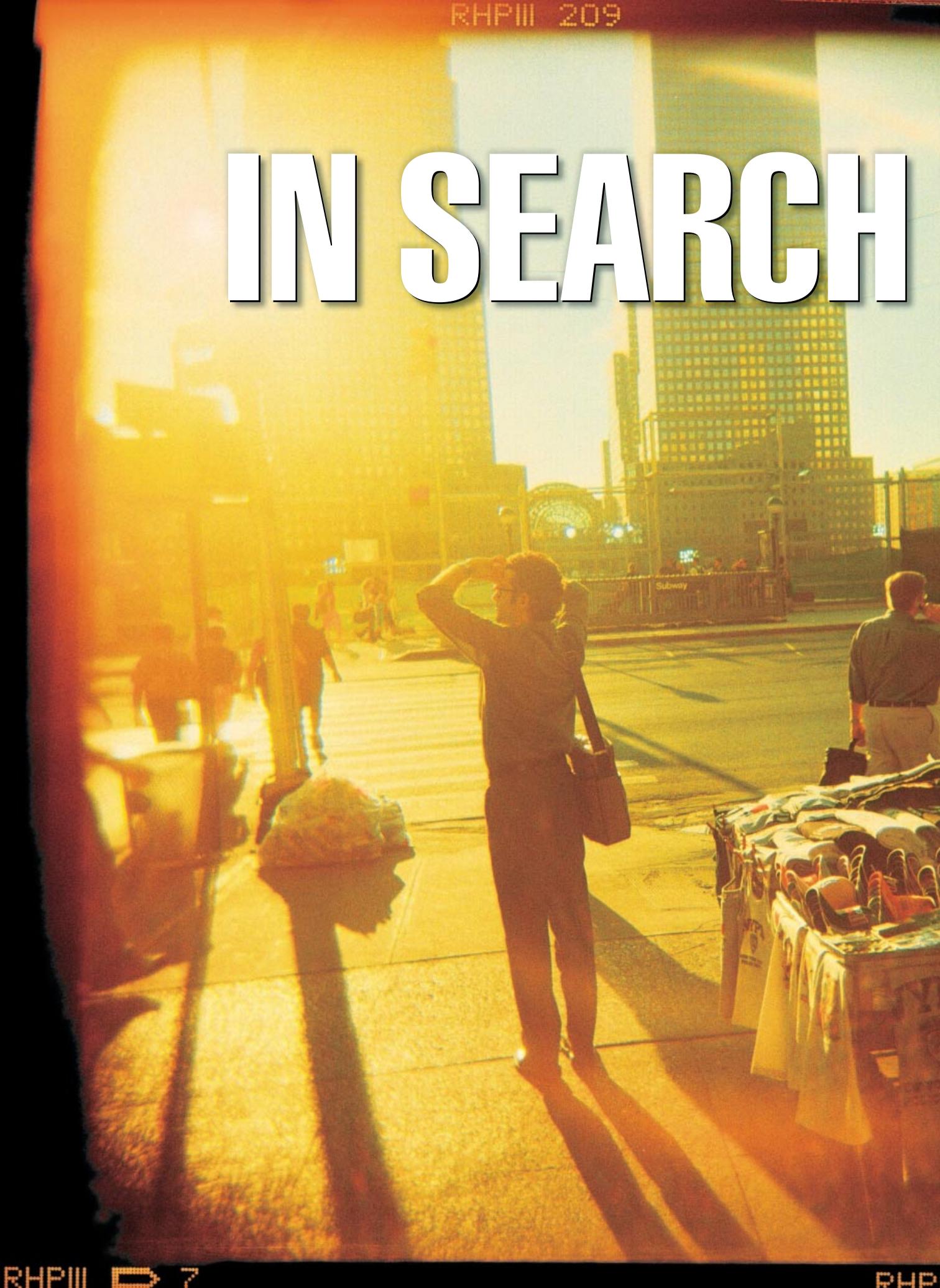


IN SEARCH



OF ANSWERS

A troubled commission and its daunting quest for clues to the 9/11 attacks

BY CHITRA RAGAVAN

For biotech lobbyist Lisa Raines, it was supposed to be a quick business trip from suburban Virginia to California. “We kissed and said ‘good-bye’ and ‘I love you,’” recalls her husband, Stephen Push, “and I never realized it was going to be the last time.” The date was Sept. 11, 2001. The plane Raines was on, American Airlines Flight 77, crashed into the Pentagon. The couple had been married 21 years. Push, now 51, quit his job as a public-relations executive and started a group called Families of September 11. Now he has a new mission in life: seeking accountability from the government. “I still don’t know,” he says, “what happened on my wife’s plane.”

Push and the families of more than 3,000 men, women, and children who died on September 11 want answers. But it remains to be seen whether official Washington wants to give them any. The hopes of the relatives rest with an independent bipartisan commission that, after months of delays, is just now beginning its work in earnest. This week, the commission will hold its third public hearing.

Its charge is sobering—and the panel is off to a rocky start. The staff has only recently

Onlookers are still emotionally drawn to ground zero.

sought millions of pages of government documents, and commission members have already angered some victims' relatives. Says 9/11 widow Kristen Breitweiser, "There's a whole range of things that this commission doesn't want to ask."

The commission exists only because of people like Push and Breitweiser, whose husband, Ronald, 39, a money manager at Fiduciary Trust, died in the World Trade Center. Many in the nation's capital wanted to leave the 9/11 postmortems to a joint congressional inquiry that will issue its final unclassified report shortly. But the families and congressional Democrats were adamant in their belief that the Capitol Hill probe was too limited, and media-savvy family members like Push knew how to get attention. The pressure forced Congress and a reluctant Bush administration to set up the commission last November. Almost immediately, it bogged down. The panel's first chairman, Henry Kissinger, and vice chairman, George Mitchell, resigned after refusing to accede to demands by some of the victims' families that they disclose potential conflicts. Bush then named former New Jersey Gov. Thomas Kean as chairman. "I felt like a ton of bricks had been dropped on me," says Kean. Democrats named former Indiana Rep. Lee Hamilton vice chair. "I hung up the phone," he says, "and I didn't know where to begin."

Staffing up. The first order of business was hiring a staff of about 60—former prosecutors; law enforcement, intelligence, and military experts, and historians—and persuading the White House to increase the commission's budget, from \$3 million to \$14 million. Finding a staff director was especially excruciating. No one in the intelligence community wanted what is widely viewed as a thankless job. So Hamilton reached out to Philip Zelikow, a former defense attorney, constitutional scholar, presidential historian, and national security expert who has held sensitive positions under Republicans and Democrats. Zelikow, 48, who coauthored a book (*Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft*) with National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, is acutely aware of the sky-high expectations of the 9/11 families and the inevitable pitfalls. "When you have events of this kind," he says, "there's no document that can acquire the status of 'revelations that quiet all concerns.'"

The commission's mandate is to build on the report of the



congressional investigation. But it wasn't until May that members obtained access to some key classified transcripts related to the congressional probe, because the White House, which had waived executive privilege over those documents, was debating whether it could restrict the commission's access to the transcripts. "Every day that goes by," says commissioner Timothy Roemer, a former Democratic representative from Indiana, "sand drops through the hourglass."

The panel's report is due next May. But Watergate prosecutor Richard Ben-Veniste, a commission member, says it helps that the commission will be able to build on the congression-



ONE INVESTIGATOR'S STORY

Back from the brink of hell

Lt. Kevin Shaeffer sat in his cubicle at the Navy Command Center in the heart of the Pentagon, eyes riveted on a giant bank of television screens. Two planes had hit the World Trade Center, and Lieutenant Shaeffer, a naval warfare strategist, knew that this was *war*. But he never dreamed the enemy would be bold enough to bring the battle to his doorstep.

Suddenly, a massive orange fireball—part of American

Airlines Flight 77—threw Shaeffer violently to the ground. "I was on fire and I knew it," says Shaeffer, now a staff member for the independent 9/11 commission. "My head was burning—everything was burning."

Still on fire, Shaeffer, 29, crawled through dense smoke, over debris and rubble, past sparking electrical wires. Finally, he made it outside, into the sun. "I could see my hands and arms for the first time," says

Kevin Shaeffer at his office in Washington, D.C.

Relatives at a New York commission hearing in March



heat on recalcitrant agencies at a news conference this week.

U.S. News has learned that the commission's staff has prepared a wish list of senior officials it wants to interview. Most notable: President Bush, Vice President Cheney, and former President Bill Clinton. Whether these leaders will accept the invitation is an open question. The White House did not respond to a request for comment. Last November, President Bush told commissioners to "follow all the facts wherever they lead." Zelikow says he's confident the White House will provide complete access. "Zelikow," says commissioner John Lehman, "has done a first-class job of wearing down the bureaucracy." But Roemer says it's too soon to tell whether the White House will help or "stonewall" the commission. After all, he says, the administration refused to give congressional investigators access to the National Security Council, the cabinet-level body that advises the president and implements his counterterrorism directives. "The NSC," says Roemer, "is the nexus." Push is cautiously optimistic. "Everyone knows [the commission] has subpoena power," he says. "They're going to do their best to convince people the gun is loaded and cocked."

Competing agendas. The stakes are high all around. There will surely be a political price to pay if the White House denies the panel documents by asserting a claim of executive privilege. Though it agreed to the commission's creation, the Bush administration views it warily, mindful that its report will be released in the middle of an election year. For the families, however, the commission is the only hope of redress, since they can't sue anyone for answers under the terms of a financial settlement hammered out by a special master appointed by President Bush. "Do we have a no-fault government here?" demands Mindy Kleinberg, who lost her husband, Alan, 39, in the World Trade Center attacks. "I didn't *think* we had a no-fault government. I want accountability."

If that's the case, the families may have the wrong commission. Zelikow says that instances of wrongdoing will "of course" be pursued. But he maintains that "fundamentally, our inquiry is a historical and policy inquiry." The families say that's unacceptable. "We have made it abundantly clear, over and over again," fumes Breitweiser, "that we will

al report. "This is more of a baton pass," says Ben-Veniste, "than a race from a dead stop."

But the panel's slow start has delayed the request for millions of pages of documents from agencies all over Washington. And so far, sources say, the response has been a trickle. A commission source says the White House, the CIA, and especially the Defense Department and the FBI have all been slow to provide documents requested. Commissioners were concerned enough to raise the issue during a meeting last week with FBI Director Robert Mueller, and "I think he received the message clearly," says one source. The commission will turn up the

Shaeffer. "My skin was falling off."

Suddenly, Shaeffer saw a man approaching. It was Sgt. 1st Class Donald "Steve" Workman. "I looked at him and said, 'Don't let me die,' and he said, 'I'm not going to let you die.'" Workman found an ambulance and got Shaeffer to Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Inside, a nurse was shouting, "50 percent! 50-50." Shaeffer knew the shorthand: He was burned over half his body. He had only a 50-50 shot at survival. "I grabbed the person and said, 'I'm alive, I'm going to live,'" Shaeffer recalls. Next he

heard a doctor calling out for a ring cutter to slice his wedding band and Naval Academy class ring. "And I yelled out, 'Stop!'" Shaeffer says. He yanked the rings off his burned fingers himself.

Comeback. What followed was three months of pure agony. Four times a day at Washington Hospital Center's burn unit, nurses lowered Shaeffer into a stainless steel tank and scrubbed his wounds with iodine. Shaeffer was grateful no one heard his screams; he was on a ventilator. The burn surgeon even resorted to medieval medicine, placing maggots on Shaeffer to eat

his rotting skin, reducing the chance of infection.

There was one bright spot: a visit to the burn unit by President George Bush and wife Laura. The president told Shaeffer's wife, Blanca, to contact him if they needed anything at all. On an impulse, Sergeant Workman, 43, a frequent companion, piped up. "Actually, Mr. President, there is one thing." Perplexed, Bush asked, "What is it?" Workman replied: "Kevin would like to play a round of golf with you when he's feeling better." Bush looked at Shaeffer, and said, "You're on." Two weeks ago, soon

after *U.S. News* interviewed Shaeffer, Bush's personal aide called to tell Shaeffer that Bush will soon make good on his promise.

Shaeffer was discharged on Dec. 14, 2001. While in the hospital, he underwent 17 surgeries and suffered two near-fatal heart attacks. His emotional recovery has been almost as rough. Shaeffer, who lost 29 colleagues in the Pentagon attack, signs his E-mails, "Never Forget." "We lost so much that day," he says. But he did gain something: a special bond with Sergeant Workman. "He's my brother," Shaeffer says. —C.R.

not stand for some broad, sweeping historic account."

A couple of weeks ago, family members grew furious when they learned that the panelists for this week's public hearing on the history of al Qaeda are all academics. Another complaint: Even though state-sponsored terrorism is supposed to be one of the topics the panel will address, Saudi Arabia's ties to the September 11 attacks—15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudis—is not on the table. Last week, Zelikow apologized to the families, saying that this week's hearing will address the subject of al Qaeda and terrorism only in broad terms because the commission still has not obtained important documents.

Personal stakes. That doesn't mean the commission won't get there. Former New Jersey Attorney General John Farmer, a staff member, believes that he and his colleagues will ultimately be able to write a definitive report. "It's going to be complex," says Farmer. "The truth often is." And if the commission does succeed, it may hinge on a simple fact: Many members and staff have a deep personal stake. "Where I live, we went to funerals for six months," Kean says. "We lost neighbors and very close friends. I'm still angry."

Emily Walker, one of the panel's staff liaisons to the 9/11 families, is a former senior Citigroup executive who was on her way to work in Building 7 of the World Trade Center, which collapsed later that day. Walker had previous brushes with terrorism in London, where she worked for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in the 1990s; Irish Republican Army bombs devastated its offices. Cancer killed her mother and brother at young ages. "I already got it," she says, "that life is short. I learned that lesson in spades." Commission staffer Kevin Shaeffer is a Navy lieutenant who was forced to retire after being badly burned in the attack on the Pentagon (box, Page 18). And staffer John Azzarello, a former federal prosecutor in Newark, N.J., lost two brothers-in-law in the attacks. Timothy Grazioso, 42, and John Grazioso, 41, were both traders at Cantor Fitzgerald. Azzarello will never forget his wife Carolee's grief. "She kept repeating, 'My brothers, my brothers, I think they're both in there,'" says Azzarello. "All this sorrow and loss, and there was nothing I could do about it." Now Azzarello hopes he *can*. ●

With Carol Hook, Douglas Pasternak, and Kevin Whitelaw

Talking the talk to Tehran

In Washington and Los Angeles, Iranian exiles are stirring the pot by satellite

BY BAY FANG

Off a street of strip malls in Reseda, Calif., tucked behind an Arby's, a burly Iranian-American talk-show host named Shahram Homayoun sits at a desk, before a camera, and tries to foment revolution. But instead of guests joining him on the peach-wallpapered set that resembles a suburban living room, Homayoun has only a phone and fax machine, and he works like a switchboard operator. As the camera rolls and the phone lights up, he punches a button and answers with a brusque hello in Farsi, "*Balle*." There is a pause, a click, then a distant voice on the line. The caller is from Tehran Pars, a suburb of Tehran. The hard-line clerics in the government have just erected a tower in his neighborhood, he says, and it's transmitting microwaves to jam the satellite signal: "I don't know what to do." Homayoun listens, thanks the man, then takes another call. "*Balle*." The caller plunges ahead. "I am an electrical engineer from Tehran," he says, then refers to the first caller, proposing a solution. "Let me tell my friend what to do."

On the other side of the country—the United States, that is—Reza Pahlavi sits in a black SUV, driving in circles around official Washington. He has a speaker in the middle of the dashboard connected to his cellphone, and he, too, is fielding calls from Iran. The son of the ex-shah instructs his driver not to stop, for fear of an as-

sassination attempt by Iran's ruling Islamic regime. So round and round he goes, as an earnest voice emanates from the speaker. "A group of plainclothes thugs on motorbikes . . . came into one dorm and locked the doors from the inside. The girls sleep in full outdoor

