



U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT

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# UNRAVELING THE PLOT

**New evidence shows setbacks and stumbles—  
and plans for a much more deadly attack**



**Those who attended last week's hearings found themselves reliving the agony of that fateful day.**





**HOT SEAT.** The public hearings that 9/11 commission Chairman Thomas Kean presided over last week were both illuminating and explosive.

BY CHITRA RAGAVAN

**H**e was a trusted lieutenant of Osama bin Laden and one of the world's most feared terrorists. But these days, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, who conceived and directed the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, is one of the U.S. government's best sources of information on al Qaeda. Captured in Pakistan in March 2003 and held incommunicado ever since, Mohammed has been explaining, under what the government calls "coercive" interrogation, just how the 9/11 attacks were executed and, more important, how and when bin Laden plans to strike again. No one knows just how much to trust Mohammed's tales or exactly how they were obtained, but what he's saying is fascinating—and frightening. "They keep going back [to Mohammed]," says a U.S. intelligence official, "and running scenarios by him."

Last week, in its 12th and final public hearing, the bipartisan commission investigating

the 9/11 attacks disclosed new details that dramatically fleshed out the plot, based largely on the transcripts of Mohammed's interrogations and those of more than 100 other detainees, including Ramzi Binalshibh, a wannabe hijacker who became Mohammed's principal overseas terror coordinator after his application for a U.S. visa was rejected four times. The commission's conclusion that there was no "collaborative relationship" between al Qaeda and former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein

reignited the political firestorm over the Iraq war (Page 18). But it was the depiction of the Federal Aviation Administration, the Pentagon, and the White House floundering in understandable confusion immediately after the attacks that brought tears to the eyes of 9/11 relatives, as did the disclosures of clues ignored and opportunities missed. The two days of hearings also had moments of chilling drama, like the tape-recorded voice of lead hijacker Mohamed Atta—never heard publicly before—telling terrified passengers, "We have some planes. Just stay quiet, and you'll be OK. We are returning to the airport."

The lasting contribution of the panel's investigation is likely to be the deeper understanding it provided of both the 9/11 plot and of bin Laden's al Qaeda organization. Mohammed's confessions offer a rare glimpse of bin Laden as the hands-on CEO of a global terror conglomerate and a micromanager extraordinaire—an employer who urges his followers to think big but doesn't hesitate to clip their

### A DEADLY THREAT FULFILLED

Another kidnapped American, another beheading. This time, despite pleas from his New Jersey family and many Saudis, a group claiming to be part of al Qaeda executed Paul Johnson, 49, an American hostage who had been working for defense contractor Lockheed Martin in Riyadh. U.S. intelligence's top suspect: Abd al-Muhsin al-Muqran (aka Abu Hajir al-Najdi), a 30-ish top al Qaeda operations expert in Saudi Arabia. Muqran, an explosives expert blamed for several apartment bombings, was killed late Friday by Saudi security forces.



# A TERRIFYING PLOT, YEARS IN THE MAKING

**Mid-1996:** Khalid Shaikh Mohammed (KSM) presents ideas to Osama bin Laden and Mohammed Atef for attacks against the United States. One option is a larger, bicoastal version of the 9/11 attacks. Bin Laden is noncommittal.

## 1999

**Early 1999:** Bin Laden summons KSM to Kandahar, Afghanistan, and approves his plan to use aircraft as weapons.

**Spring:** KSM meets with bin Laden and Atef in Kandahar to develop initial target list. Bin Laden favors the White House and Pentagon. KSM favors the World Trade Center. The U.S. Capitol also is on the list. A larger concept of the plot includes plane crashes in Southeast Asia.

**Fall:** Four hijackers train at a terror camp in Afghanistan.

**November/December:** Four young men living in Hamburg, Germany, travel separately to Afghanistan and pledge allegiance to bin Laden.

## 2000

**January:** Four al Qaeda hijackers meet in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

**January 15:** Nawaf Alhazmi and Khalid Almihdar travel to Los Angeles, the first 9/11 operatives to enter the United States.

**Early 2000:** The four men from Hamburg meet with KSM in Karachi, Pakistan, for training.

**Feb. 5:** Alhazmi and Almihdar move into an apartment in San Diego and make cursory attempts to learn English and take flying lessons.

**Early March:** The Hamburg recruits return to Germany. Three get U.S. visas, but Ramzi Binalshibh is rejected repeatedly.



Investigators are still unsure whether the Capitol was a 9/11 target.

**April/May:** Bin Laden cancels the Southeast Asia plot.

**May and June:** Three Hamburg operatives arrive in the United States and scout out flight schools.

**June:** Almihdar abruptly returns to his family in Yemen, upsetting KSM. Bin Laden intervenes, and Almihdar remains in the plot.

**August:** Three Hamburg operatives obtain private pilot's certificates.

**September:** Bin Laden and KSM send Zacarias Moussaoui to Malaysia

for pilot training.

**October:** Ziad Samir Jarrah leaves the United States for the first of five overseas trips, this one to visit his girlfriend.

**December 8:** Pilot Hani Hanjour travels to San Diego to join Alhazmi.

**December 12:** The two settle in Mesa, Ariz., and Hanjour brushes up on his flight training. His instructors say he is sub par.

## 2001

**February:** Moussaoui enters the United States and enrolls in Airman Flight School in

Norman, Okla.

**March:** Hanjour and Hamzi leave the Southwest and settle in Northern Virginia.

**Late April:** The "muscle" hijackers begin to arrive in Florida, Washington, D.C., and New York.

**May:** Hanjour and Alhamzi move into an apartment in Paterson, N.J.

**May 12:** The date that bin Laden had wanted for the attacks, the seven-month anniversary of the USS Cole bombing.

**July 4:** Almihdar re-enters the United States and promptly joins the Paterson group.

**Summer:** Flying first-class, the pilots make cross-country surveillance flights and engage in additional flight training.

**Mid-July:** Mohamed Atta meets with Binalshibh in Spain to discuss progress. He says he needs five or six more weeks. Binalshibh departs to report to al Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan.

**Early August:** Atta waits at the Orlando airport for a "muscle" hijacker turned away by U.S. immigration officials.

**August 13:** Key players meet in Las Vegas.

**Mid-August:** Atta informs Binalshibh of the date for the attacks. He picks September 11 because he knows Congress will be in session.

**August 15:** The FBI learns of Moussaoui's training on flight simulators in Minneapolis.

**August 26 to Sept. 5:** The hijackers purchase their plane tickets.

**Early September:** Terrorists head for Maryland, Newark, N.J., and Boston.

wings when they overreach. The interrogation reports reveal how bin Laden pulled off the attacks despite internecine rivalries among hijackers, logistical obstacles, strategic disagreements, and deep philosophical conflicts among the top al Qaeda ranks. The strike date was set just three weeks before the attacks, and as late as September 9, lead hijacker Atta wasn't sure whether one of the planes should crash into the White House or the U.S. Capitol. But he picked September to ensure that Congress was back in session, just in case the Capitol was the target.

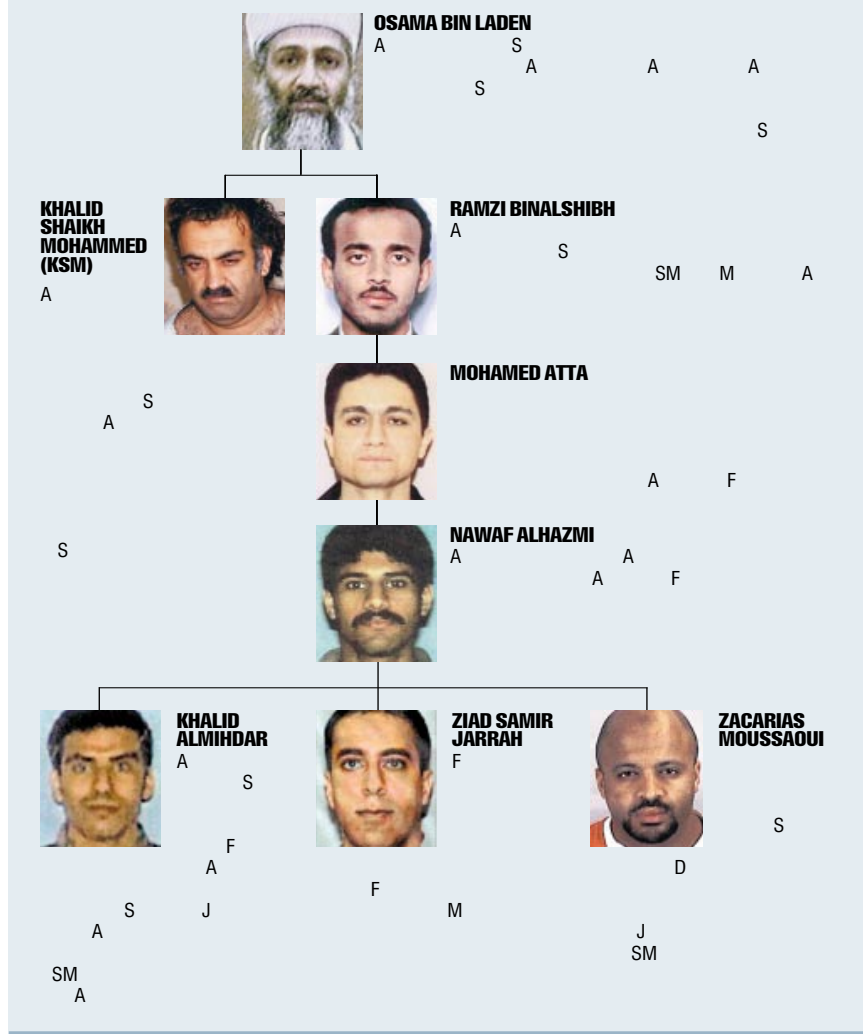
**Bin Laden says OK.** There are still plenty of doubts about Mohammed's credibility. Federal investigators have been unable to corroborate some of his claims, and some commissioners seem skeptical of the aggrandizing portrait that has been painted of bin Laden. "Is this really realistic that he was that much hands-on in charge?" asked Commissioner Fred Fielding, "or was this perhaps part of a propaganda activity to praise and elevate the mastermind of this plot now that it's turned out to be successful?" The answers to these questions may never be known, but the bottom line is that the commission seems to have accepted much of what Mohammed has said.

These are among the commission's most significant findings:

- Mohammed first planned on hijacking 10 planes and crashing them into nuclear power plants, the CIA and FBI buildings, and the tallest buildings in California and Washington State. He personally wanted to pilot a 10th plane, kill all adult male passengers on board, and, after delivering a speech denouncing U.S. policy in the Middle East, release all the women and children. Al Qaeda leaders were "lukewarm" to these ideas, the commission's report said, and bin Laden nixed the 10-plane plan.
- Bin Laden selected all the hijackers—the four pilots, the 15 "musclemen," and at least nine alternates, whom the commission has identified by name. When two of bin Laden's four original candidates were unable to obtain visas to come to the United States, Mohammed expanded the plan to include a Southeast Asian component so the pair might still participate. The proposed expansion involved simultaneously blowing up or crashing U.S. aircraft flying Pacific routes from Southeast Asia. Once again, bin Laden vetoed the second component as too ambitious.
- Bin Laden twice tried to move up the strike date and urged Mohammed to consider a scaled-down version of the

## ROGUES' GALLERY: THE MEN BEHIND THE 9/11 ATTACKS

A detailed picture of the al Qaeda hierarchy that planned and carried out the 9/11 terrorist attacks emerged during last week's commission hearings.



plot in order to do so; Mohammed and Atta persuaded him to be patient.

Mohammed told investigators he planted the seeds of 9/11 in bin Laden's mind in 1996 when he was a terrorist freelancer eager to forge ties with al Qaeda. "Bin Laden listened but did not commit himself," the report says. But in early 1999, bin Laden told Mohammed that "his proposal to use aircraft as weapons now had al Qaeda's full support."

Things soon got underway. Two of bin Laden's original candidates for the mission, Nawaf Alhazmi and Khalid Almihdar, made their way to Los Angeles and then San Diego, traveling undetected even though their names were on a terrorist watch list. Almihdar and Alhazmi were hardly sophisticated travelers. Mo-

ammed had to teach them "basic English words and phrases and showed them how to read a phone book, make travel reservations, use the Internet, and encode communications," the commission says. Once in the United States, the two men often skipped their English classes; it soon became clear that they would make lousy pilots. Mohammed wanted to dump Almihdar after he abandoned Alhazmi and joined his family back in Yemen. Bin Laden insisted that Almihdar remain.

In the meantime, four Middle Eastern men from Hamburg, Germany—including Binalshibh—visited al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and pledged allegiance to bin Laden. Bin Laden designated one, Atta, as emir or team leader, and Atta met with the al Qaeda chief to pick the



# IN THE SKIES, A SCARY 'FAILURE OF IMAGINATION'

America's aviation system was "unsuitable in every respect" for dealing with the simultaneous terrorist hijackings that occurred over about two hours on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001. That was the frightening and ultimately depressing news shared on Thursday, the last day of the 9/11 commission's hearings. From abysmal communications to what panel Vice Chair Lee Hamilton called a "failure of imagination," what ensued that day was high-level chaos at the Federal Aviation Administration, the North American Aerospace Defense Command, and the Pentagon's National Military Command Center, tempered with heroic rank-and-file ingenuity. When it was all over by about 10 a.m., as United Airlines Flight 93 crashed into the soft earth of rural Pennsylvania, none of the four planes had been diverted from their sinister paths. And the question of whether the United States could protect itself from a domestic air assault was grimly answered: It could not.

Behind the chaos were systemic problems that overcame the agencies. For one, rusty Cold War policies were still in force, with the government expecting bad guys to fly in from places like Russia. There had never been any training to deal with suicide hijackings of domestic planes. Indeed, the warnings that had been issued that summer about new methods of al Qaeda attack never reached key people like Benedict Sliney, the operations manager at the FAA's New York Terminal Radar Approach Control. He was the one who ordered the unprecedented "ground stop" of every plane in America on 9/11. But had he known about, say, the Au-



A security camera captures the terrifying moment as American Flight 77 strikes the Pentagon on 9/11.

gust 2001 CIA memo "Islamic Extremist Learns to Fly," he says he would have stopped everyone sooner.

The final, comprehensive picture of what happened that morning yielded troubling details. For instance, within minutes of United Flight 175's crash into the South Tower—American Airlines Flight 11 had struck the North Tower minutes earlier—an FAA operations manager in Boston asked the FAA's command center in Virginia to order pilots across the country to lock their cockpit doors. That message was never relayed. The military was alerted too late to intercept the hijacked planes. Jets guarding Washington were based 130 miles away at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia. Phone lines for President Bush, who was away at an event in Florida, kept cutting out. Military and government commanders, even Vice President Dick Cheney, got critical information from

television news. Cheney, who relayed the president's extraordinary approval to shoot down the planes, did not do so until all the planes had crashed. The FAA didn't tell NORAD that Flight 93 was hijacked until it was down. Military jets were scrambled, but without the pilots' knowing why they were scrambled. Commissioner John Lehman called FAA's headquarters a "black hole" where information disappeared.

**Heroics.** Yet there were some shining moments of improvisation. In one instance, a United Airlines dispatcher took it upon himself to call the pilots of the 16 planes on his watch and tell them what was happening. One of those planes was Flight 93. It was hijacked two minutes later, but the passengers and crew struggled with the hijackers, crashing the plane in a Pennsylvania field, preventing it from reaching its target, believed to be either

the White House or the U.S. Capitol.

And the lessons learned have brought better protection. The NORAD commander, Gen. Ralph Eberhart, claims that communications and protocols have improved so much that today it would be possible to shoot down four similarly hijacked aircraft. Among the changes: The FAA and NORAD have a 24-hour communication line, the number of bases housing battle-ready jets has jumped from seven to as many as 30, and the phone lines on Air Force One have been improved. But Eberhart says what's more important is strengthening U.S. border and airport security to ensure that terrorists can't get into the country or onto U.S. planes. As Commission Chairman Thomas Kean said, solemnly wrapping up the hearing: "This is the story of a lot of problems, and shame on us if we don't learn from it."

—Samantha Levine

targets. Bin Laden favored the Pentagon and the White House. Mohammed was enamored of the World Trade Center; his nephew, Ramzi Yousef, had exploded a truck bomb there in 1993.

By June 2000, flight training had begun in earnest, and bin Laden and his associates began selecting the “muscle,” the hijackers who would help take over the cockpit and overcome any resistance. The men began traveling to Afghanistan for “special training on how to conduct hijackings, disarm sky marshals, and handle explosives and knives.”

**Sally’s “skirts.”** One of the commission’s most dramatic revelations casts new light on the role of Zacarias Moussaoui, now awaiting trial in connection with the 9/11 attacks. Mohammed and Binalshibh offered conflicting views of Moussaoui’s role. Binalshibh told interrogators that Moussaoui popped into the picture when Atta and another pilot, Ziad Samir Jarrah, a member of the Hamburg cell, began to squabble. Jarrah wanted more of a say in the planning, and Atta evidently frowned on Jarrah’s frequent contacts with his family and girlfriend. Mohammed feared that Jarrah might drop out of the plot, according to Binalshibh. In this version, Mohammed told Binalshibh that if Atta and Jarrah “divorced,” it would cost a lot of money to train another pilot. Mohammed told Binalshibh to “send the skirts to Sally,” which Binalshibh says meant Mohammed was asking him to send funds to Moussaoui, to train him to replace Jarrah. Not so, Mohammed says: Moussaoui was actually slated for a “second wave” of attacks and had no role in the 9/11 plot. As for Jarrah, his girlfriend bought him a one-way ticket to Germany. Atta drove Jarrah to the airport. Binalshibh picked him up in Germany,

and the two men had an emotional conversation, says Binalshibh, in which he convinced Jarrah to stick with the plot.

As the attacks neared, the commission says, bin Laden was taking heat from his advisers and from Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar. Fearing U.S. military

retaliation, the advisers wanted bin Laden to cancel the plot. Bin Laden refused. The attacks, he believed, according to the commission, would “reap al Qaeda a recruiting and fundraising bonanza.”

The commission’s hearings and its final report, due out next month, are more than



## ON IRAQ-AL QAEDA: A DIALOGUE OF THE DEAF

**T**he 9/11 commission inadvertently struck a raw political nerve with a single paragraph in one of its detailed staff reports. “We have no credible evidence that Iraq and al Qaeda cooperated on attacks against the United States,” it concluded.

The finding is perhaps the most substantial challenge yet to one of the Bush administration’s central justifica-

tions for last year’s invasion of Iraq, which it described as part of America’s war on terror. The 9/11 commission’s report is the most comprehensive external review of the highly classified intelligence on which top Bush officials based their case for war. Its conclusions confirm what *U.S. News* and other media organizations reported before the Iraq war—that

there was little, if any, evidence of a working relationship between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden.

Alarmed at the renewed doubts about its case for war as the political season is heating up, the White House struck back quickly, insisting that the commission’s report did acknowledge contacts between the two and was consistent with its asser-

tions. President Bush insisted there was a “relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda.” Vice President Cheney, appearing on CNBC’s *Capital Report*, was even more vociferous, angrily insisting that the evidence was “overwhelming” and attacking the press for distorting the commission’s findings.

**Doubts.** Bush and Cheney noted that they never explicitly claimed that Saddam was behind the 9/11 attacks. But many Americans have





**DISAGREEMENT.** Bush insisted there was a “relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda.”

tacks on packed commuter trains in Madrid in March, resulting in the defeat of the Spanish prime minister and the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq, U.S. officials went back to Mohammed. He told them that while al Qaeda had never discussed timing terrorist attacks to influence elections, bin Laden definitely would have noted the ripple effect. Mohammed also told interrogators that while al Qaeda had no role in the October 2001 anthrax attacks, the terrorist organization’s leadership had again noted the panic that resulted. He also told officials that al Qaeda has experimented with anthrax, and he emphasized repeatedly that bin Laden is deeply interested in weapons of mass destruction but said he had not been privy to specific information. Recently, Attorney General John Ashcroft named seven individuals he believes may be plotting new attacks. It was Mohammed, sources say, who personally fingered those six men and one woman. The latter, Mohammed says, has been a useful source of information for al Qaeda on unconventional weapons.

Mohammed maintains that al Qaeda also wants to repeat its 9/11 success and use commercial aircraft as bombs again, according to U.S. officials. Those same officials report that in late 2002 and early to mid-2003, they learned that al Qaeda was quietly trying to get its operatives aboard planes. They were thwarted, but several remain at large. “I don’t think we have a good handle on what’s yet to unfold,” says a U.S. official. “It’s as much a cat-and-mouse game as I’ve ever seen.” ●

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just an intimate examination of the attacks and the planning that led up to them. One commissioner, former Illinois Gov. James Thompson, called America an “unguardable, unprotectable” nation and wondered aloud: “How in the world do we ever expect to win this war?” U.S. officials

are hoping Mohammed can help them answer that question. “There is credible evidence that [al Qaeda] intends to strike in the United States sometime in the summer or fall of this year,” says Robert Bonner, commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection. After the al Qaeda at-

clearly been left with that impression. Polls show that between 40 and 50 percent of people still believe that Saddam was involved in 9/11. Bush himself has sometimes muddied the waters. In a letter to Congress last spring, he wrote that the Iraq war was consistent with legislation allowing him to take action against terrorists, including those involved with 9/11.

The 9/11 commission, however, could find only a

few examples of contacts—mostly a decade ago—between al Qaeda members and Iraqi intelligence agents. In each case, it concluded that the meetings did not result in any collaboration.

In response, Bush and Cheney cited the presence of terrorist Abu Musab Zarqawi in Iraq before the war as the best proof of an al Qaeda connection. But many intelligence officials believe that Zarqawi acted independently and spent most of his time

before the war in Kurdish-controlled Iraq, beyond the reach of Saddam. Cheney also repeated an old report that one of the 9/11 hijackers met with an Iraqi intelligence officer in Prague, Czech Republic, even though the 9/11 commission explicitly debunks the claim.

The Senate Intelligence Committee, which has also been investigating the performance of U.S. intelligence, last week approved a highly critical report about

the CIA’s assessments of Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction. Sources say the conclusions on Iraqi links to terrorism are similar to those of the 9/11 commission, but the CIA is currently trying to block declassification of about a third of the report. Several senators are threatening to unilaterally declassify it, but talks with the CIA are continuing, and nothing will be released publicly until mid-July at the earliest. —Kevin Whitelaw