



Media Reality ✓ Check

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In 2002, Network News Breathlessly Touted Charge That “Bush Knew” In Advance of 9/11 Plot

Interested in Connected Dots or Blaming Bush?

Since June 27, Republican Congressman Curt Weldon has been sounding the alarm about a possible failure by U.S. officials to have thwarted the awful attacks of September 11, 2001. But the same news networks that in May 2002 hyped the notion that President Bush “knew” about the impending terrorist attacks have been slow to broadcast charges that civilian officials felt they could not take action when military intelligence officials fingered 9/11 ringleader Mohammad Atta as a potential al-Qaeda operative. Could the networks be flinching because this alleged lapse happened in 2000, when Bill Clinton was still in charge?

Last week, the broadcast networks finally picked up the story that a military officer says that his group, working on a project called “Able Danger,” had identified Atta and three other future hijackers. The *CBS Evening News* led with the story August 9; correspondent Wyatt Andrews, who interviewed the officer, said he “seemed like a very straight shooter,” (see box) but the *Evening News* has since ignored the story. The *NBC Nightly News* ran a story by Jim Miklaszewski on August 13, a newscast pre-empted in much of the country by NASCAR. ABC’s *World News Tonight* has so far skipped it, although news reader Bill Weir gave it two sentences on the August 10 *Good Morning America*.

Contrast the networks’ current aloofness with their eagerness to hype suggestions in May 2002 that the government should have been able to prevent 9/11 because President Bush’s daily briefing on August 6, 2001 talked about al-Qaeda’s desire to hijack an American plane:

■ Filling in as anchor of CNN’s *NewsNight*, Judy Woodruff told viewers on May 15, 2002: “President Bush knew that al-Qaeda was planning to hijack a U.S. airliner, and he knew it before September the 11th.”

■ The next morning on ABC’s *Good Morning America*,

Charles Gibson promoted the cynical idea that Bush had faked his shocked reaction to news of the 9/11 attacks. “Was the President really surprised?” Gibson speculated.

■ All three networks led their May 16, 2002 newscasts with suggestions Bush had concealed vital information. CBS’s Dan Rather began: “The Bush administration spent this day trying to explain what President Bush knew about terror threats before the September 11th attack on America, [and] why the President never shared what he knew with the public.”

■ Two years later, after the text of the briefing memo was released, CBS’s Michelle Miller on the April 12, 2004 *Early Show* showcased a 9/11 widow who claimed her husband “might have escaped the 76th floor of the South Tower, she says, if key facts in the August 6th memo were released to the public.”

The actual text of that memo: “We have not been able to corroborate some of the more

sensational threat reporting, such as that from a [censored] service in 1998 saying that Bin Ladin wanted to hijack a U.S. aircraft to gain the release of the ‘Blind Shaykh’ Umar Abd al-Rahman and other U.S.-held extremists.” In other words, Bush was told of an old, unverified ransom plot, not a devilish scheme to use planes as guided missiles.

Three years ago, excited reporters implied that knowing al-Qaeda was interested in hijacking was a vital piece of the 9/11 puzzle. Weldon says the government knew who Atta was and that he was in the U.S. — a much bigger clue. So why aren’t the media as frenzied as they were in May 2002, when they thought “Bush knew”? — *Rich Noyes*

Sounds Like a Story Worth Pursuing

“Bob, this man seemed like a very straight shooter, said he was CIA-trained. I had no reason to disbelieve his story that he tried to tell the FBI about Mohamed Atta but was told that the military was not allowed to spy on people inside the country. That seems pretty straight. But then he also says he was one of two agents allowed to talk to the 9/11 Commission to tell them this same story, says he did so. And here, the 9/11 Commission says flatly that they had no prior knowledge about Mohammed Atta in this country.” — Wyatt Andrews, August 9 *CBS Evening News*. *The Commission later acknowledged that its staff had been briefed about “Able Danger.”*

L. Brent Bozell III, Publisher; Brent Baker, Rich Noyes, Tim Graham, Editors; Geoffrey Dickens, Brian Boyd, Brad Wilmouth, Ken Shepherd, Megan McCormack and Mike Rule, Media Analysts; Michelle Humphrey, Research Associate; Michael Chapman, Director of Communications. See daily *CyberAlerts* at www.mrc.org.