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Who Authorized the Flights?
Clarke Claims Responsibility
Ex-counterterrorism czar approved
post-9-11 flights for bin Laden family
By Alexander Bolton

Editor's Note:

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Clarke claims responsibility
Ex-counterterrorism czar approved post-9-11 flights for bin Laden family
By Alexander Bolton

Richard Clarke, who served as President Bush's chief of counterterrorism, has claimed sole responsibility for approving flights of Saudi Arabian citizens, including members of Osama bin Laden's family, from the United States immediately after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

In an interview with *The Hill* yesterday, Clarke said, "I take responsibility for it. I don't think it was a mistake, and I'd do it again."

Most of the 26 passengers aboard one flight, which departed from the United States on Sept. 20, 2001, were relatives of Osama bin Laden, whom intelligence officials blamed for the attacks almost immediately after they happened.

Clarke's claim of responsibility is likely to put an end to a brewing political controversy on Capitol Hill over who approved the controversial flights of members of the Saudi elite at a time when the administration was preparing to detain dozens of Muslim-Americans and people with Muslim backgrounds as material witnesses to the attacks.

Several Democrats say that at a closed-door meeting May 6, they pressed members of the commission investigating the attacks of Sept. 11 to find out who approved the flights.

Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), who attended the meeting, said she asked former Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.) and former Secretary of the Navy John Lehman, a Republican, "Who

authorized the flight[s] and why?"

"They said it's been a part of their inquiry and they haven't received satisfactory answers yet and they were pushing," Boxer added.

Another Democrat who attended the meeting confirmed Boxer's account and reported that Hamilton said: "We don't know who authorized it. We've asked that question 50 times."

Referring to questions about who authorized the flights, former Rep. Tim Roemer (D-Ind.), one of the 10 members of the bipartisan Sept. 11 commission, said in an interview Monday: "In my mind, this isn't resolved right now. We need more clarity and information from the relevant political sources and FBI sources."

But Clarke yesterday appeared to put an end to the mystery.

"It didn't get any higher than me," he said. "On 9-11, 9-12 and 9-13, many things didn't get any higher than me. I decided it in consultation with the FBI."

Clarke's explanation fit with a new stance Hamilton has taken on the issue of the Saudi flights.

Hamilton said in an interview Friday that when he told Democratic senators that the commission did not know who authorized the Saudi flights, he was not fully informed.

"They asked the question 'Who authorized the flight?' and I said I did not know and I'd try to find out," Hamilton said. "I learned subsequently from talking to the staff that we thought Clarke authorized the flight and it did not go higher."

"I did not at any point say the White House was stalling," Hamilton added. "They asked me who authorized it, and I said we didn't know."

Hamilton said, however, that "we asked the question of who authorized the flight many times to many people."

"The FBI cleared the names [of the passengers on the flights] and Clarke's CSG [Counterterrorism Security Group] team cleared the departure," Hamilton said.

He cautioned that this is "a story that could shift, and we still have this under review."

This new account of the events seemed to contradict Clarke's sworn testimony before the Sept. 11 commission at the end of March about who approved the flights.

"The request came to me, and I refused to approve it," Clarke testified. "I suggested that it be routed to the FBI and that the FBI look at the names of the individuals who were going to be on the passenger manifest and that they approve it or not. I spoke with the - at the time - No. 2 person in the FBI, Dale Watson, and asked him to deal with this issue. The FBI then approved the flight."

"That's a little different than saying, 'I claim sole responsibility for it now,'" Roemer said yesterday.

However, the FBI has denied approving the flight.

FBI spokeswoman Donna Spiser said, "We haven't had anything to do with arranging and clearing the flights."

"We did know who was on the flights and interviewed anyone we thought we needed to," she said. "We didn't interview 100 percent of the [passengers on the] flight. We didn't think anyone on the flight was of investigative interest."

When Roemer asked Clarke during the commission's March hearing, "Who gave the final approval, then, to say, 'Yes, you're clear to go, it's all right with the United States government,'" Clarke seemed to suggest it came from the White House.

"I believe after the FBI came back and said it was all right with them, we ran it through the decision process for all these decisions that we were making in those hours, which was the interagency Crisis Management Group on the video conference," Clarke testified. "I was making or coordinating a lot of the decisions on 9-11 in the days immediately after. And I would love to be able to tell you who did it, who brought this proposal to me, but I don't know. The two - since you press me, the two possibilities that are most likely are either the Department of State or the White House chief of staff's office."

Instead of putting the issue to rest, Clarke's testimony fueled speculation among Democrats that someone higher up in the administration, perhaps White House Chief of Staff Andy Card, approved the flights.

"It couldn't have come from Clarke. It should have come from someone further up the chain," said a Democratic Senate aide who watched Clarke's testimony. Clarke's testimony did not settle the issue for Roemer, either.

"It doesn't seem that Richard Clarke had enough information to clear it," Roemer said Monday.

"I just don't think that the questions are resolved, and we need to dig deeper," Roemer added. "Clarke sure didn't seem to say that he was the final decisionmaker. I believe we need to continue to look for some more answers."

Roemer said there are important policy issues to address, such as the need to develop a flight-departure control system.

Several Democrats on and off the Hill say that bin Laden's family should have been detained as material witnesses to the attacks. They note that after the attacks, the Bush administration lowered the threshold for detaining potential witnesses. The Department of Justice is estimated to have detained more than 50 material witnesses since Sept. 11.

Clarke said yesterday that the furor over the flights of Saudi citizens is much ado about nothing.

"This is a tempest in a teapot," he said, adding that, since the attacks, the FBI has never said that any of the passengers aboard the flight shouldn't have been allowed to leave or were wanted for further investigation.

He said that many members of the bin Laden family had been subjects of FBI surveillance for years before the attacks and were well-known to law-enforcement officials.

"It's very funny that people on the Hill are now trying to second-guess the FBI investigation."

The Sept. 11 commission released a statement last month declaring that six chartered flights that evacuated close to 140 Saudi citizens were handled properly by the Bush administration.

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