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Letters to the Editor

No Evidence of Pre-9/11 Hijacker Discovery

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In his Nov. 17 editorial-page commentary "Why Did the 9/11 Commission Ignore 'Able Danger'?" former FBI Director Louis Freeh charged the 9/11 Commission with a "failure to investigate" a military intelligence team named Able Danger. We understand that Mr. Freeh, like other federal officials whose agencies' pre-9/11 failures we documented, may not agree with the facts and findings in our report. To paraphrase our former colleague Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Mr. Freeh is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts.

The 9/11 Commission's executive director and two senior staff members met with Lt. Col. Anthony Shaffer in Bagram, Afghanistan, in October 2003. Lt. Col. Shaffer advised the group about the existence of a pre-9/11 Pentagon data-mining program called Able Danger, which our staff immediately proceeded to investigate. The commission requested a comprehensive list of all documents on the Able Danger program related to terrorism and Afghanistan. And the Pentagon confirms it provided all relevant Able Danger documents to the commission.

Lt. Col. Shaffer also claims he told the commission staff in that same meeting that Able Danger had identified Mohamed Atta. However, three commission staff members and a White House attorney who were present affirm that Atta's name was not mentioned. Atta's name did not appear in Lt. Col. Shaffer's own talking points for the meeting.

In the commission's review of Able Danger documents, there was no mention of Mohamed Atta. There were no charts, no data sets, and no analysis identifying Mohamed Atta or any of the other hijackers pre-9/11. There was no evidence that Able Danger identified Mohamed Atta as an individual of interest before he hijacked a plane on Sept. 11.

On June 12, 2004, Navy Capt. Scott Phillpott told the commission staff that during a meeting four years earlier he briefly saw Mohamed Atta's name and photo on a chart. Capt. Phillpott provided no documentary evidence -- no data, no analysis, no chart -- to support his account. He subsequently recalled that Atta had been part of a Brooklyn cell early in 2000. We know what Atta was doing at that time, and evidence we examined does not square with this account. That detailed evidence encompasses documents on Atta's travels, activities and entry into the United States, including INS and State Department records. As Mr. Freeh knows, investigators must substantiate eyewitness accounts with hard evidence and cold facts. With regard to this assertion, there is none.

Commission investigators had already reviewed all Able Danger documents related to al Qaeda and found no such evidence. In the absence of documentary evidence, the allegation that Able Danger had identified Atta before 9/11 remains unsubstantiated.

Rep. Curt Weldon claims in his book "Countdown to Terror" that in late September 2001 he gave a chart to then-Deputy National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley, a chart made before 9/11 containing the name and photograph of Mohamed Atta. Mr. Freeh refers to this allegation in his commentary. Mr. Hadley remembers no such chart, and his office, after twice reviewing its records, has found no such chart. The Defense Department has found no pre-9/11 chart or document identifying Mohamed Atta in its exhaustive internal investigation of Able Danger. Rep. Weldon has not produced this chart, which he provided neither to the Congressional Joint Inquiry investigation, nor to the 9/11 Commission. In fact, he did not state publicly that Able Danger had identified Mohamed Atta before 9/11 until June 2005, nearly four years after his meeting with Mr. Hadley.

There is no documentary evidence that Able Danger identified Mohamed Atta as an al Qaeda operative before 9/11. The 9/11 Commission found no such evidence. The Department of Defense has found no such evidence in its internal review. The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence is now conducting its own investigation of Able Danger. We look forward to its findings, and any new facts it may uncover.

The 9/11 Commission held 12 public hearings over 19 days, interviewed more than 1,200 people, and reviewed more than two million pages of documents. Our findings are based on verifiable facts and documented with hundreds of footnotes. We encourage those who challenge our thoroughness and motives to meet the same standard.

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(Messrs. Gorton and Roemer are former members of the 9/11 Commission and are currently members of the 9/11 Public Discourse Project.)