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Thursday June 7th 2012

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Hot leads, stolen identities

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New evidence suggests that innocent people may have been named as hijackers after the real hijackers stole their identities. As America's biggest-ever criminal investigation continues, separating truth from fiction is proving tricky

Sep 21st 2001 | from the print edition

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THE 19 hijackers are all dead, and most of their bodies were blasted to fragments and scattered in the wind. But at least investigators know their names, and can use them to hunt down their associates and sponsors. Or do they? The FBI admitted on September 19th that some of the terrorists' names released last week may be false. Some of the dead hijackers appear to have stolen the identities of innocent men.

A Saudi Arabian diplomat went further, telling the *Washington Post* that his government believed that most, if not all, of the hijackers were using aliases. So far, the Saudis say they have confirmed two cases of hijackers using stolen passports.

Last week, the FBI named Salem Alhazmi as one of the men who seized control of the aeroplane that crashed into the Pentagon. His picture was released and widely publicised. But Saudi officials say that the real Mr Alhazmi works at a petrochemical plant in the Saudi city of Yanbu, has never been to America and is suprised to see his photograph in all the papers labelled as that of a dead terrorist. Mr Alhazmi told reporters in Saudi Arabia that his passport had been stolen by a pickpocket when he visited Egypt three years ago.

Another Saudi named by the FBI as one of the hijackers was Abdulazziz Alomari, who the Saudis say is, in fact, an electrical engineer who had his passport and other papers

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stolen while a student in Denver in 1996. He is now, they say, living in Saudi Arabia.

And the father of Muhammad Atta, alleged to have been one of the pilots who crashed into the World Trade Centre, said that his son was still alive and that he had spoken to him on the telephone after the time he was said to have blown himself up. Of course, Mr Atta's father may have his own reasons for wanting to proclaim his son's innocence.

Amid all this confusion, the chase continues. Seven thousand American agents are searching frantically for evidence. Syria and Lebanon have reportedly been asked to extradite several men suspected of involvement in various terrorist attacks over the past two decades. British detectives are pursuing reports that five of the terrorists trained in Britain. German police have searched flats in Hamburg where three of the alleged killers lived. The FBI have detained about 115 people. But the case against Osama bin Laden, the Saudi millionaire who is suspected of having ordered last week's carnage, is still far from proven. President George Bush seems to have few doubts, however. He said on September 17th that he wants Osama bin Laden "dead or alive".

The clues unearthed so far, which will be presented to a federal grand jury in White Plains, New York state, certainly support the view that Mr bin Laden may have been involved. But they are circumstantial, not conclusive. Mr Atta, if that was his real name, reportedly had links to Egyptian Islamic Jihad, a group allied with al-Qaeda. Khalid al-Midhar, another of the dead hijackers, was filmed in January last year in Malaysia meeting a man later linked to a suicide attack on the *USS Cole*, an American naval vessel, in Yemen last October, which Mr bin Laden is thought to have ordered. Two other hijackers are reported to have been in contact with a suspected agent of Mr bin Laden near Boston. The richest source of evidence implicating Mr bin Laden may prove to be the large number of telephone calls and e-mails between known terrorists which were intercepted after the attack. The conspirators appear to have kept silent about their plans before September 11th, but to have boasted carelessly about their gruesome triumph after the event.

Most of the people detained so far are being held on the pretext of "immigration concerns", after initial questioning suggested that they might know something useful. New rules announced by the Justice Department on September 18th allow police to hold suspected visa-violators indefinitely in order to investigate the terrorist attacks. Other detainees are being held on warrants that describe them as "material witnesses", and FBI officials said that they had a list of nearly 200 people wanted for questioning, of whom at least 44 were trained pilots.

Three men were arrested in Detroit after FBI agents raiding their home found fake immigration papers and what appeared to be documents related to an aborted terrorist attack on an American military base in Turkey last year. FBI agents burst into a liquor store in Chicago with guns drawn and seized a Kuwaiti clerk who was said to be a friend of one of Mr bin Laden's alleged footsoldiers.

Two men were held after investigators caught them carrying box-cutting knives similar to those used by the hijackers, and large amounts of cash. Another was found with a fake pilot's licence. Most intriguing of all was a man called Zacarias Moussaoui, who was

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arrested on August 17th, almost a month before the attack. Mr Moussaoui is being held for carrying a false French passport, but what intrigues investigators is that he took flying lessons in Oklahoma, failed to win a licence to pilot small planes, but still insisted on buying time on a flight simulator for a passenger airliner. He was reportedly keen to know how to steer the plane, but not how to take off or land. He is also thought to have visited Afghanistan several times in the 1990s. Newspapers speculate that he might have intended to take part in last week's horror: three of the planes had five hijackers, while one had only four. But investigators have no proof, and Mr Moussaoui refuses to answer questions.

John Ashcroft, America's attorney-general, confirmed on September 18th that investigators were looking into the possibility that terrorists intended to capture more than the four airliners that crashed. Among the flights reportedly being scrutinised is American Airlines Flight 195, which was scheduled to leave Boston's Logan airport at 9am on September 11th, heading for San Francisco. The flight was delayed, however. It was still on the ground at 9.25am, when the Federal Aviation Administration halted all flights in response to the attack on the World Trade Centre. Investigators want to question some of the passengers on this flight and others who failed to show up when their flights were rescheduled.

The FBI was embarrassed to reveal that two of the presumed hijackers had been under investigation before last week's outrage, but eluded capture long enough to board an aeroplane and crash it into the Pentagon. Officials admitted on Sunday September 16th that they had been looking for Mr al-Midhar and his associate, Nawaq al-Hamzi, since August. They knew that both men were in America. But their efforts to find them appear to have consisted mainly of entering their names into a law-enforcement database, so that the intelligence services would have been alerted if they had been arrested for any other offence. But they kept out of trouble until September 11th, when they checked on to American Airlines Flight 77. No one realised who they were until it was too late.

Investigators believe that about 50 terrorists were directly involved in the attack. Nineteen took part in the hijackings: all are dead. Another 30 or so provided support from the ground.

Despite such blunders, the story behind last week's outrage is gradually being pieced together. According to Mr Ashcroft, investigators have 96,000 leads. Investigators believe that about 50 terrorists were directly involved in the attack. Nineteen took part in the hijackings. Another 30 or so provided support from the ground. Some of these are reported to have left suicide notes, but it is not clear whether any have actually killed themselves. Police at every American port and border post are watching to make sure that none escapes.

Mr Atta was on American Airlines Flight 11, which crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Centre. Marwan al-Shehhi, a close associate, is believed to be the man who steered United Airlines Flight 175 into the south tower 18 minutes later. Atta the pilot Reuters

The two appear to have been plotting for years. They lived together in a flat in Hamburg, Germany, where they studied at the local technical university. Former neighbours described them as fluent German-speakers who kept to themselves but prayed irritatingly

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loudly at night. They received many visitors in their flat, all young men, many with beards and wearing Middle Eastern robes. When their flat was raided by detectives last week, however, it had been stripped and re-painted, leaving no clues, not even a hair or a fragment of skin.

Flight school

Last year the two men went to Venice, Florida, where they enrolled at one of several flying schools in the area. Staff at the school said the two men, who claimed at this point to be Afghan, worked hard to win their pilots' licences, but that Mr Atta was prone to defying instructions: on one occasion, he reportedly broke safety rules by walking across a busy runway. Several of the other suspected hijackers also took flying lessons in Florida. Everyone assumed that they were planning to return home and become commercial pilots—many foreigners take flying lessons in America because they are cheap.

Although the terrorists are thought to have been motivated by an extreme and violent interpretation of Islam, some of them appear to have adopted a few western vices while living in the West. Some drank alcohol and rented pornographic videos. Most shaved off their beards, although this may have been done to disguise themselves.

As the investigation progresses, more details will emerge. Detectives have found the "black box" flight recorders from two of the jets that were hijacked, including United Airlines Flight 93, which crashed in woodlands in Pennsylvania. The recordings from that flight could reveal whether reports are true that passengers, hearing that other aeroplanes had been crashed into the World Trade Centre, overpowered the hijackers to prevent them doing something equally murderous.

The investigation has revealed how vulnerable an open, liberal, capitalist society can be. At least 16 of the 19 hijackers entered the country with visas legally issued by friendly American consulates. Though they loathed liberal capitalism, they did not hesitate to use its infrastructure to attack it. On September 11th, they used jet airliners, symbols of the West's mobile and technologically sophisticated society, as a weapon of war. They learned to fly in a country where any foreign student who can pay his fees is welcome. They rented cars from big rental agencies, and they bought knives and cans of mace for subduing their fellow passengers from the world's cheapest and friendliest stores. They probably swapped messages on the Internet, using encryption software that can be downloaded anywhere. When their planes crashed into the World Trade Centre, the West's free media immediately gave the hijackers all the publicity they craved. And a text-and-graphics message began to circulate, via the mobile telephones of terrorist sympathisers throughout the Middle East, showing an aeroplane crashing into a skyscraper with the caption: "It hit and did not miss" in Arabic.

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Less free societies are in many ways less vulnerable. There was little terrorism in the old Soviet Union, except that which the government inflicted on its own people. Would-be counter-revolutionaries could not move around so easily, nor could they buy their equipment from well-stocked stores. A legal system that could impose savage punishments on a mere suspicion deterred all but the bravest. And even when terrorists did blow things up, the fact that the state could hush it up greatly reduced their ability to spread alarm. Terrorists in a closed society do not make the evening news.

As the investigation continues, the American government will want to know whether the attack was the work solely of stateless terrorists, or whether there was a rogue state involved behind the scenes. The al-Qaeda organisation of Osama bin Laden, the prime suspect, is rich and has tentacles in many countries. But was it capable of executing such a well-co-ordinated attack?

Mr Ashcroft has said that he was sure that the terrorists enjoyed the support of a rogue nation. This is possible, but the evidence so far is inconclusive. Mr Atta is reported to have met an Iraqi intelligence official earlier this year, which is the first circumstantial link between Saddam Hussein's regime and the attack. Mr Hussein has applauded the attack, but denied involvement.

Mr Bush and other administration officials have repeatedly promised to go to war not only with the culprits, but with all those who harboured or helped them as well. So the stakes are high. The results of the investigation could determine where American bombs and missiles start to fall.

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