

POLITICAL ANALYSIS:

Why Were Saudi Passengers Flown Out of the Country After 9-11?

by Margie Burns

APRIL 9, 2004--Days after September 11, 2001, with commercial flights grounded throughout the United States, the Bush administration allowed select commercial jets to fly out of the country. Four manifests from these flights have been released by Craig Unger, author of the nonfiction bestseller *House of Bush, House of Saud*. [The passenger lists are posted online](#).

A September 13 flight from Lexington KY to London carried 15 passengers including eight Saudis; a Las Vegas-to-Switzerland flight the next day carried seven Saudis; a "VIP flight" from New York to Paris on September 22 carried 12 passengers including four Saudis; and another Las Vegas-to-Paris VIP flight on September 24 carried 24 passengers including 11 Saudis. Some individuals who jetted away would have been "persons of interest" in any traditional investigation, and others had round-the-clock knowledge of them.

Former Clinton and Bush counterterrorism adviser Richard Clarke was asked about the flights at the April 8 hearing of the 9-11 Commission. Clarke responded that "someone" in the Saudi embassy had requested that some persons be allowed to fly out and that he refused, kicking the request over to the FBI, which permitted them.

Questions abound. If Saudi royals and other Muslims feared reprisals, and were allowed to leave for their personal safety, how could that rationale have applied to British citizens Jack Rusbridge and Anthony John Stafford, on the flight out of Lexington, or to US citizen Dean Earl Knecht, on the Vegas-Paris flight? Assuming that diplomatic immunity covers the 20,000-member Saud family, does it also cover family employees of other nationalities, including British and American? Why was a CEO of a Middle East bank flown out, given the importance of the "money trail" in investigating terrorism? If allowing the Saudis' servants out of the country was a humanitarian gesture, why was a prize-winning Egyptian physicist also aboard? Some family members of September 11 victims, through the Family Steering Committee, have also asked why Saudi royals and others were permitted to fly in commercial air space, when victims' relatives were not given that permission.

Two of the flights departed from Las Vegas, where at least five of the September 11 suspects visited several times between May 2001 and August 2001. At least one suspect from each of the four planes hijacked stayed in Las Vegas. Suspected ringleader Mohamed Atta checked in at a Vegas hotel on June 29, checked out on July 1, and returned on August 13. Marwan Al-Shehhi, Hani Hanjour, Nawaf Al-Hazmi and Ziad Jarrah all traveled there at least once. All together, the hijackers made at least six trips to Vegas. Yet, a few days after 9-11, 31 passengers were allowed to fly out of Vegas, including one passenger named Al-Hazmi. The Saudi royals aboard were mostly adults, with only a handful of young people born in the 1980s and 1990s. At least one of these passengers, Ahmed bin Salman, the notable horse race fan and owner of a Kentucky Derby winner, died in somewhat suspicious circumstances a few months after his return home. Another passenger, a British citizen, was his longtime chauffeur and major domo, to whom Ahmed Salman gave a prize horse race in return for his services.

What were the Saudi royals and the others doing in Las Vegas? When did these officials and those connected with them go to Las Vegas, and how long did they stay there? What reason could the hijackers have had for trips to Vegas in the first place, other than to rendezvous with authorities, given that any extra movement increased their chances of getting caught? Is the White House really going to pretend that five skyjackers including the fervently devout Atta went to Vegas, separately and together at different times, only to fit in a little gambling? Was Las Vegas really just a convenient hub for the travelers? What other passengers on several other flights out were connected to these?

Is the White House really going to pretend that five skyjackers, including the fervently devout Atta, went to Vegas--separately and together at different times--only to fit in a little gambling? And what about those Saudi Royals who were in Las Vegas on 9/11--and allowed to leave the US?

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This story was published on April 9, 2004.