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Senators Accuse Pentagon of Obstructing Inquiry on Sept. 11 Plot

By DOUGLAS JEHL

WASHINGTON, Sept. 21 - Senators from both parties accused the Defense Department on Wednesday of obstructing an investigation into whether a highly classified intelligence program known as Able Danger did indeed identify Mohamed Atta and other future hijackers as potential threats well before the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

The complaints came after the Pentagon blocked several witnesses from testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee at a public hearing on Wednesday. The only testimony provided by the Defense Department came from a senior official who would say only that he did not know whether the claims were true.

But members of the panel, led by Senator Arlen Specter, Republican of Pennsylvania, said they regarded as credible assertions by current and former officers in the program. The officers have said they were prevented by the Pentagon from sharing information about Mr. Atta and others with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

A Pentagon spokesman had said the decision to limit testimony was based on concerns about disclosing classified information, but Senator Charles E. Grassley, Republican of Iowa, said he believed the reason was a concern "that they'll just have egg on their face."

Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr., Democrat of Delaware, accused the Pentagon of "a cover-up" and said, "I don't get why people aren't coming forward and saying, 'Here's the deal, here's what happened.' "

The Pentagon has acknowledged that at least five members of Able Danger have said they recall a chart produced in 2000 that identified Mr. Atta, who became the lead hijacker in the Sept. 11 plot, as a potential terrorist, but they have said that others with knowledge of the project do not remember that.

"Did we have information that identified Mohamed Atta?" said William Dugan, an assistant to Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld for intelligence oversight, restating a question put to him. "I've heard the testimony presented, but I don't know."

Among those who testified about Able Danger was Representative Curt Weldon, Republican of Pennsylvania, who has mounted an aggressive campaign to call public attention to the program, which used computers to sift through volumes of unclassified data in an effort to identify people with links to Al Qaeda.

Another witness, Mark S. Zaid, a Washington lawyer, testified on behalf of two clients whom the Pentagon barred from speaking at the hearing. The clients, Lt. Col. Anthony Shaffer, an Army Reserve officer, and J. D. Smith, a former contractor on the project, were in the audience.

Erik Kleinsmith, a former Army major who was involved in early stages of Able Danger, told the committee that, by April 2000, the program had collected "an immense amount of data for analysis that allowed us to map Al Qaeda as a worldwide threat with a surprisingly significant presence within the United States." Mr. Kleinsmith said that his affiliation with the project ended about that time and that he had no recollection of information that identified Mr. Atta.

But Mr. Kleinsmith told the committee that he had been "forced to destroy all the data, charts and other analytical product" in compliance with Army regulations that prohibit keeping data related to American citizens and others, including permanent residents who have legal protections, unless the data falls under one of several restrictive categories.

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