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New facts back tale of brush with Atta

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NEW intelligence reports suggesting that 9/11 ringleader Mohammed Atta arrived in the US in late 1999 or early 2000 - six months earlier than previously thought - are likely to spark a reassessment of public servant Johnelle Bryant's incredible story of a face-to-face meeting with the terrorist.

In an extraordinary 2002 interview later branded a hoax by some media -- including the ABC's Media Watch -- Ms Bryant claimed to have met Atta in late April or early May of 2000 when she worked as a loan officer with the US Department of Agriculture's farm services agency in Florida.

Ms Bryant, who was medically retired from the department last year, said Atta had tried to apply for a \$US650,000 US government loan to buy a six-seat, twin-engine aircraft that he wanted to convert to a crop duster.

In her interview with the US's ABC network, Ms Bryant told how Atta became angry when told he was ineligible for the loan and how he became fixated with an aerial photo of Washington DC hanging on her office wall.

When told the picture was not for sale, Ms Bryant said Atta became "very bitter".

"I believe he said: 'How would America like it if another country destroyed that city and some of the monuments in it'."

But despite some independent support for her claims, Ms Bryant's account was dismissed as a fake on the grounds that Atta did not get a visa to enter the US until May 18, 2000, and did not arrive until June 3 that year on a flight from Prague that landed at New Jersey's Newark airport.

Her claims were ignored in last year's 9/11 commission report on the events leading up to the terrorist attacks. The commission accepted the advice of US immigration authorities that Atta did not arrive until June 2000.

But revelations that a military intelligence unit known as Able Danger believed Atta had actually arrived in the US in late 1999, or at the latest very early in 2000, have lent new credibility to Ms Bryant's claims, while at the same time raising questions about the exchange of intelligence between US security agencies.

Investigations are now under way into what was done before September 11, 2001, about Able Danger's identification of Atta and three of the other future hijackers as members of an al-Qa'ida cell operating in the US and why the 9/11 commission also chose to ignore the unit's intelligence findings.

Republican congressman Curt Weldon has accused the commission of ignoring material that would have forced a rewriting of the September 11 events.

Spokesman Al Felzenberg admitted this week the commission had been sceptical when an Able Danger officer briefed it in July last year and said Atta had been in the US in late 1999 or early 2000. The investigators knew this was impossible, Mr Felzenberg said, since travel records confirmed he had not entered until June 2000.

"The information that (the officer) provided us did not mesh with other conclusions that we were drawing," he said. "There was no way that Atta could have been in the US at that time."

But British columnist Mark Steyn, who wrote an opinion article for The Australian last month describing Ms Bryant's meeting with Atta as "the defining encounter of the age", claims US immigration did not keep then -- and still does not keep now -- reliable and comprehensive records of entry by foreigners.

"It (US immigration) cannot authoritatively state the date of Atta's first visit to the US," Steyn said. "If you choose to believe June 3, 2000, as the definitive date of his first visit, that's basically an act of faith. There were a number of sightings of Atta in the US before that time, in Florida and elsewhere."

In his column Steyn attacked Ms Bryant for failing to realise the danger Atta represented because of political correctness.

"She knows an opportunity for multicultural outreach when she sees one," he wrote.

In her interview, Ms Bryant said Atta had threatened to cut her throat and initially didn't want to deal with her because she was a woman.

But she said: "I felt that he was trying to make the cultural leap from the country that he came from. I was attempting, in every manner I could, to help him make his relocation to our country as easy for him as I could."

Ms Bryant recognised Atta from a newspaper photograph after the 9/11 attacks and defied Agriculture Department orders in telling her story to the media.

"The American people, the public, need to be aware that if these men can walk into my office, they can walk into your office, they can walk into anyone's office," she said.

Ms Bryant could not be reached for comment this week but Bob Epling, president of Community Bank of Florida, which let office space to the agency Ms Bryant worked for, said he had no doubt Atta visited the premises.

He said Ms Bryant had referred Atta to the "agriculture-friendly" CBF. "Atta was 15 steps away from walking into our loan department and making an application," Mr Epling said yesterday. "He chose not to."

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