

SIGHT AND SIGH

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FORESIGHT—AND HINDSIGHT

IN COMPOSING THIS NARRATIVE, we have tried to remember that we write with the benefit and the handicap of hindsight. Hindsight can sometimes see the past clearly—with 20/20 vision. But the path of what happened is so brightly lit that it places everything else more deeply into shadow. Commenting on Pearl Harbor, Roberta Wohlstetter found it “much easier *after* the event to sort the relevant from the irrelevant signals. After the event, of course, a signal is always crystal clear; we can now see what disaster it was signaling since the disaster has occurred. But before the event it is obscure and pregnant with conflicting meanings.”¹

As time passes, more documents become available, and the bare facts of what happened become still clearer. Yet the picture of *how* those things happened becomes harder to reimagine, as that past world, with its preoccupations and uncertainty, recedes and the remaining memories of it become colored by what happened and what was written about it later. With that caution in mind, we asked ourselves, before we judged others, whether the insights that seem apparent now would really have been meaningful at the time, given the limits of what people then could reasonably have known or done.

We believe the 9/11 attacks revealed four kinds of failures: in imagination, policy, capabilities, and management.

11.1 IMAGINATION

Historical Perspective

The 9/11 attack was an event of surpassing disproportion. America had suffered surprise attacks before—Pearl Harbor is one well-known case, the 1950 Chinese attack in Korea another. But these were attacks by major powers.

While by no means as threatening as Japan’s act of war, the 9/11 attack was in some ways more devastating. It was carried out by a tiny group of people,

not enough to man a full platoon. Measured on a governmental scale, the resources behind it were trivial. The group **itself** was dispatched by an organization based in one of the poorest, most **remote**, and least industrialized countries on earth. This organization recruited a **mixture** of young fanatics and highly educated zealots who could not find suitable places in their home societies or were driven from them.

To understand these events, we attempted to reconstruct some of the context of the 1990s. Americans celebrated the end of the Cold War with a mixture of relief and satisfaction. The people of the United States **hoped** to enjoy a peace dividend, as U.S. spending on national security **was cut** following the end of the Soviet military threat.

The United States emerged into the post-Cold War world as the globe's pre-eminent military power. But the vacuum created by the sudden demise of the Soviet Union created fresh sources of instability and new challenges for the United States. President George H. W. Bush **dealt with** the first of these in 1990 and 1991 when he led an international coalition to reverse Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Other examples of U.S. leaders' handling new threats included the removal of nuclear weapons from Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan; the Nunn-Lugar threat reduction program to help contain new nuclear dangers; and international involvement in the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo.

America stood out as an object for **admiration, envy, and blame**. This created a **kind of cultural asymmetry**. To us, Afghanistan seemed very far away. To members of al Qaeda, America **seemed very close**. In a sense, they were more globalized than we were.

Understanding the Danger

If the government's leaders understood the gravity of the threat they faced and **understood** at the same time that their policies to eliminate it were not likely to succeed any time soon, then history's judgment will be harsh. Did they understand **the gravity of the threat**?

The U.S. government responded vigorously when the attack was on our soil. Both Ramzi Yousef, who organized the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, and Mir Amal Kansi, **who** in 1993 killed two CIA employees as they waited to go to work in Langley, Virginia, were the objects of relentless, uncompromising, and successful efforts to bring them back to the United States to stand trial for their crimes.

Before 9/11, al Qaeda and its affiliates had killed fewer than 50 Americans, including the East Africa embassy bombings and the *Cole* attack. The U.S. government took the threat seriously, but not in the sense of mustering anything like the kind of effort that would be **gathered** to confront an enemy of the first, second, or even third rank. The modest national effort exerted **to contain** Serbia and its depredations in the Balkans between 1995 and 1999, for example, was orders of magnitude larger than that devoted to al Qaeda.

As best we can determine, neither in 2000 nor in the first eight months of 2001 did any polling organization in the United States think the subject of terrorism sufficiently on the minds of the public to warrant asking a question about it in a major national survey. Bin Ladin, al Qaeda, or even terrorism was not an important topic in **the** 2000 presidential campaign. Congress and the media called little **attention** to it.

If a president wanted to rally the American people to a warlike effort, he would need to publicize an assessment of the growing al Qaeda danger. Our government could spark a full public discussion of who Usama Bin Ladin was, what kind of organization he led, what Bin Ladin or al Qaeda intended, what past attacks they had sponsored or encouraged, and what capabilities they were bringing together for future assaults. We believe American and international public opinion might have been different—and so might the range of options for a president—had they been **informed** of **these** details. Recent examples of such debates include calls to arms against such threats as Serbian ethnic cleansing, biological attacks, Iraqi **weapons of mass destruction**, global climate change, and the HIV/AIDS **epidemic**.

While we now know that al Qaeda was **formed** in 1988, at the end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the intelligence community did not describe this organization, at least **in documents** we have seen, until 1999. A National Intelligence Estimate **distributed** in July 1995 predicted future terrorist attacks against the United States—and **in the** United States. It warned that this danger would increase over the next several years. It **specified** as particular points of vulnerability the White House, the Capitol, **symbols of** capitalism such as Wall Street, critical infrastructure such as power grids, areas where people congregate such as sports arenas, and **civil** aviation generally. It warned that the 1993 World Trade Center bombing had been intended to kill a lot of people, not to achieve any more **traditional** political goal.

This 1995 estimate described the greatest danger as “transient groupings of individuals” that lacked “strong organization but rather are loose affiliations.” They operate “outside traditional circles but have access to a worldwide network of training facilities and safehavens.”² This was an excellent summary of the emerging danger, based on what was then known.

In 1996–1997, the intelligence community received new information making clear that Bin Ladin headed his own terrorist group, with its own targeting agenda and operational commanders. Also **revealed** was the previously unknown involvement of Bin Ladin’s organization in the 1992 attack on a Yemeni hotel quartering U.S. military personnel, the 1993 shootdown of U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopters in Somalia, and quite possibly the 1995 Riyadh bombing of the American training mission to the Saudi National Guard.

The 1997 update of the 1995 estimate did not discuss the new intelligence. It did state that the terrorist danger depicted **in** 1995 would persist. In the update’s summary of key points, the only **reference** to Bin Ladin was this sen-

tence: “Iran and its surrogates, as well as terrorist financier Usama Bin Ladin and his followers, have stepped up their threats and surveillance of US facilities abroad in what also may be a portent of possible additional attacks in the United States.”³ Bin Ladin was mentioned in only two other sentences in the six-page report. The al Qaeda organization was not mentioned. The 1997 update was the last national estimate on the terrorism danger completed before 9/11.⁴

From 1998 to 2001, a number of very good analytical papers were distributed on specific topics. These included Bin Ladin’s political philosophy, his command of a global network, analysis of information from terrorists captured in Jordan in December 1999, al Qaeda’s operational style, and the evolving goals of the Islamist extremist movement. Many classified articles for morning briefings were prepared for the highest officials in the government with titles such as “Bin Ladin Threatening to Attack US Aircraft [with anti-aircraft missiles]” (June 1998), “Strains Surface Between Taliban and Bin Ladin” (January 1999), “Terrorist Threat to US Interests in Caucasus” (June 1999), “Bin Ladin to Exploit Looser Security During Holidays” (December 1999), “Bin Ladin Evading Sanctions” (March 2000), “Bin Ladin’s Interest in Biological, Radiological Weapons” (February 2001), “Taliban Holding Firm on Bin Ladin for Now” (March 2001), “Terrorist Groups Said Cooperating on US Hostage Plot” (May 2001), and “Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in the US” (August 2001).⁵

Despite such reports and a 1999 paper on Bin Ladin’s command structure for al Qaeda, there were no complete portraits of his strategy or of the extent of his organization’s involvement in past terrorist attacks. Nor had the intelligence community provided an authoritative depiction of his organization’s relationships with other governments, or the scale of the threat his organization posed to the United States.

Though Deputy DCI John McLaughlin said to us that the cumulative output of the Counterterrorist Center (CTC) “dramatically eclipsed” any analysis that could have appeared in a fresh National Intelligence Estimate, he conceded that most of the work of the Center’s 30- to 40-person analytic group dealt with collection issues.⁶ In late 2000, DCI George Tenet recognized the deficiency of strategic analysis against al Qaeda. To tackle the problem within the CTC he appointed a senior manager, who briefed him in March 2001 on “creating a strategic assessment capability.” The CTC established a new strategic assessments branch during July 2001. The decision to add about ten analysts to this effort was seen as a major bureaucratic victory, but the CTC labored to find them. The new chief of this branch reported for duty on September 10, 2001.⁷

Whatever the weaknesses in the CIA’s portraiture, both Presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush and their top advisers told us they got the picture—they understood Bin Ladin was a danger. But given the character and pace of their policy efforts, we do not believe they fully understood just how many people

al Qaeda might kill, and how soon it might do it. At some level that is hard to define, we believe the threat had not yet become compelling.

It is hard now to recapture the conventional wisdom before 9/11. For example, a *New York Times* article in April 1999 sought to debunk claims that Bin Laden was a terrorist leader, with the headline “U.S. Hard Put to Find Proof Bin Laden Directed Attacks.”⁹ The head of analysis at the CTC until 1999 discounted the alarms about a catastrophic threat as relating only to the danger of chemical, biological, or nuclear attack—and he downplayed even that writing several months before 9/11: “It would be a mistake to redefine counterterrorism as a task of dealing with ‘catastrophic,’ ‘grand,’ or ‘super’ terrorism, when in fact these labels do not represent most of the terrorism that the United States is likely to face or most of the costs that terrorism imposes on U.S. interests.”⁹

Beneath the acknowledgment that Bin Laden and al Qaeda presented serious dangers, there was uncertainty among senior officials about whether this was just a new and especially venomous version of the ordinary terrorist threat America had lived with for decades, or was radically new, posing a threat beyond any yet experienced. Such differences affect calculations about whether or how to go to war.

Therefore, those government experts who saw Bin Laden as an unprecedented new danger needed a way to win broad support for their views, or at least spotlight the areas of dispute, and perhaps prompt action across the government. The national estimate has often played this role, and is sometimes controversial for this very reason.¹⁰ Such assessments, which provoke widespread thought and debate, have a major impact on their recipients, often in a wider circle of decisionmakers. The National Intelligence Estimate is noticed in the Congress, for example. But, as we have said, none was produced on terrorism between 1997 and 9/11.

By 2001 the government still needed a decision at the highest level as to whether al Qaeda was or was not “a first order threat,” Richard Clarke wrote in his first memo to Condoleezza Rice on January 25, 2001. In his blistering protest about foot-dragging in the Pentagon and at the CIA, sent to Rice just a week before 9/11, he repeated that the “real question” for the principals was “are we serious about dealing with the al Qida threat? . . . Is al Qida a big deal?”

One school of thought, Clarke wrote in this September 4 note, implicitly argued that the terrorist network was a nuisance that killed a score of Americans every 18–24 months. If that view was credited, then current policies might be proportionate. Another school saw al Qaeda as the “point of the spear of radical Islam.” But no one forced the argument into the open by calling for a national estimate or a broader discussion of the threat. The issue was never joined as a collective debate by the U.S. government, including the Congress, before 9/11.

We return to the issue of proportion—and imagination. Even Clarke’s note

challenging Rice to imagine the day after an attack posits a strike that kills “hundreds” of Americans. He did not write “thousands.”

Institutionalizing Imagination: The Case of Aircraft as Weapons

Imagination is not a gift usually associated with bureaucracies. For example, before Pearl Harbor the U.S. government had excellent intelligence that a Japanese attack was coming, especially after peace talks stalemated at the end of November 1941. These were days, one historian notes, of “excruciating uncertainty.” The most likely targets were judged to be in Southeast Asia. An attack was coming, “but officials were at a loss to know where the blow would fall or what more might be done to prevent it.”¹¹ In retrospect, available intercepts pointed to Japanese examination of Hawaii as a possible target. But, another historian observes, “in the face of a clear warning, alert measures bowed to routine.”¹²

It is therefore crucial to find a way of routinizing, even bureaucratizing, the exercise of imagination. Doing so requires more than finding an expert who can imagine that aircraft could be used as weapons. Indeed, since al Qaeda and other groups had already used suicide vehicles, namely truck bombs, the leap to the use of other vehicles such as boats (the *Cole* attack) or planes is not far-fetched.

Yet these scenarios were slow to work their way into the thinking of aviation security experts. In 1996, as a result of the TWA Flight 800 crash, President Clinton created a commission under Vice President Al Gore to report on shortcomings in aviation security in the United States. The Gore Commission’s report, having thoroughly canvassed available expertise in and outside of government, did not mention suicide hijackings or the use of aircraft as weapons. It focused mainly on the danger of placing bombs onto aircraft—the approach of the Manila air plot. The Gore Commission did call attention, however, to lax screening of passengers and what they carried onto planes.

In late 1998, reports came in of a possible al Qaeda plan to hijack a plane. One, a December 4 Presidential Daily Briefing for President Clinton (reprinted in chapter 4), brought the focus back to more traditional hostage taking; it reported Bin Ladin’s involvement in planning a hijack operation to free prisoners such as the “Blind Sheikh,” Omar Abdel Rahman. Had the contents of this PDB been brought to the attention of a wider group, including key members of Congress, it might have brought much more attention to the need for permanent changes in domestic airport and airline security procedures.¹³

Threat reports also mentioned the possibility of using an aircraft filled with explosives. The most prominent of these mentioned a possible plot to fly an explosives-laden aircraft into a U.S. city. This report, circulated in September 1998, originated from a source who had walked into an American consulate in East Asia. In August of the same year, the intelligence community had received information that a group of Libyans hoped to crash a plane into the

World Trade Center. **In neither case could** the information be corroborated. In addition, an Algerian group hijacked an airliner in 1994, most likely intending to blow it up over Paris, but possibly to crash it into the Eiffel Tower.¹⁴

In 1994, a private airplane had crashed onto the south lawn of the White House. In early 1995, Abdul Hakim Murad—Ramzi Yousef's accomplice in the Manila airlines bombing plot—told Philippine **authorities** that he and Yousef had discussed flying a plane into CIA headquarters.¹⁵

Clarke had been concerned about the danger **posed** by aircraft since at least the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. There he had tried to **create an air** defense plan using assets from the Treasury Department, after the Defense Department declined to contribute resources. The Secret Service continued to work on the problem of airborne threats to the Washington region. In 1998, Clarke chaired an exercise designed to highlight the **inadequacy of the** solution. This paper exercise involved a scenario in which a group of **terrorists commandeered** a Learjet on the ground in Atlanta, loaded it with explosives, and flew it toward a target in Washington, D.C. Clarke asked officials from the Pentagon, Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), and Secret Service what they could do about the situation. Officials from the Pentagon said they could scramble aircraft from Langley Air Force Base, but they would need to go to the President for rules of engagement, and **there was no mechanism to do so**. There was no clear resolution of the problem at the exercise.¹⁶

In late 1999, a great deal of discussion took place in the media about the crash **off the coast of** Massachusetts of EgyptAir Flight 990, a Boeing 767. The **most plausible explanation** that emerged was that one of the pilots had gone berserk, seized the controls, and **flown** the aircraft into the sea. After the 1999–2000 millennium alerts, when the nation had relaxed, Clarke held a meeting of his Counterterrorism Security Group devoted largely to the possibility of a possible airplane hijacking by al Qaeda.¹⁷

In his testimony, Clarke commented that he thought that warning about the possibility of a suicide hijacking would have been just one more speculative theory among many, hard to spot since the volume of warnings of “al Qaeda threats and other terrorist threats, was in the tens of thousands—probably hundreds of thousands.”¹⁸ Yet the possibility was imaginable, and imagined. In early August 1999, the FAA's Civil Aviation Security intelligence office summarized the Bin Ladin hijacking threat. After a solid recitation of all the information available on this topic, the paper identified a few principal **scenarios**, one of which was a “suicide hijacking operation.” The FAA analysts judged such an operation unlikely, because “it does not offer an opportunity for dialogue to achieve the key goal of obtaining Rahman and other key captive extremists. . . . A suicide hijacking is assessed to be an option of last resort.”¹⁹

Analysts could have shed some light on what kind of “opportunity for dialogue” al Qaeda desired.²⁰ The CIA did not write any analytical assessments of possible hijacking scenarios.

One prescient pre-9/11 analysis of an aircraft plot was written by a Justice Department trial attorney. The attorney had taken an interest, apparently on his own initiative, in the legal issues that would be involved in shooting down a U.S. aircraft in such a situation.²¹

The North American Aerospace Defense Command imagined the possible use of aircraft as weapons, too, and developed exercises to counter such a threat—from planes coming to the United States from overseas, perhaps carrying a weapon of mass destruction. None of this speculation was based on actual intelligence of such a threat. One idea, intended to test command and control plans and NORAD's readiness, postulated a hijacked airliner coming from overseas and crashing into the Pentagon. The idea was put aside in the early planning of the exercise as too much of a distraction from the main focus (war in Korea), and as too unrealistic. As we pointed out in chapter 1, the military planners assumed that since such aircraft would be coming from overseas; they would have time to identify the target and scramble interceptors.²²

We can therefore establish that at least some government agencies were concerned about the hijacking danger and had speculated about various scenarios. The challenge was to flesh out and test those scenarios, then figure out a way to turn a scenario into constructive action.

Since the Pearl Harbor attack of 1941, the intelligence community has devoted generations of effort to understanding the problem of forestalling a surprise attack. Rigorous analytic methods were developed, focused in particular on the Soviet Union, and several leading practitioners within the intelligence community discussed them with us. These methods have been articulated in many ways, but almost all seem to have at least four elements in common: (1) think about how surprise attacks might be launched; (2) identify telltale indicators connected to the most dangerous possibilities; (3) where feasible, collect intelligence on these indicators; and (4) adopt defenses to deflect the most dangerous possibilities or at least trigger an earlier warning.

After the end of the Gulf War, concerns about lack of warning led to a major study conducted for DCI Robert Gates in 1992 that proposed several recommendations, among them strengthening the national intelligence officer for warning. We were told that these measures languished under Gates's successors. Responsibility for warning related to a terrorist attack passed from the national intelligence officer for warning to the CTC. An Intelligence Community Counterterrorism Board had the responsibility to issue threat advisories.²³

With the important exception of analysis of al Qaeda efforts in chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons, we did not find evidence that the methods to avoid surprise attack that had been so laboriously developed over the years were regularly applied.

Considering what was not done suggests possible ways to institutionalize imagination. To return to the four elements of analysis just mentioned:

1. The CTC did not analyze how an aircraft, hijacked or explosives-laden, might be used as a weapon. It did not perform this kind of analysis from the enemy's **perspective** ("red team" analysis), even though suicide terrorism had become a principal tactic of Middle Eastern terrorists. If it had done so, we believe such an analysis would **soon have spotlighted a critical constraint** for the terrorists—finding a suicide operative able to fly large jet aircraft. They had never done so before 9/11.
2. The CTC did not develop a **set of telltale indicators** for this method of attack. For example, one such indicator might be the **discovery** of possible terrorists pursuing flight training to fly large jet aircraft, or seeking to buy advanced flight simulators.
3. The CTC did not propose, and **the intelligence community collection management process did not set**, requirements to monitor such telltale indicators. Therefore the warning system was not looking for information such as the July 2001 FBI report of potential terrorist interest in various kinds of aircraft training in Arizona, or the August 2001 arrest of Zacarias Moussaoui because of his suspicious behavior in a Minnesota flight school. In late August, the Moussaoui arrest was briefed to the DCI and other top CIA officials under the heading "Islamic Extremist Learns to Fly."²⁴ **Because the system was not tuned** to comprehend the potential significance of this information, the news had no effect on warning.
4. Neither the intelligence community nor aviation security experts analyzed systemic defenses within an aircraft or against terrorist-controlled aircraft, suicidal or otherwise. The many threat reports mentioning aircraft were passed to the FAA. While that agency continued to react to specific, credible threats, it did not try to perform the broader warning functions we describe here. No one in the government was taking on that role for domestic vulnerabilities.

Richard Clarke told us that he was concerned about the danger posed by aircraft in the context of protecting the Atlanta Olympics of 1996, the White House complex, and the 2001 G-8 summit in Genoa. But he attributed his awareness more to Tom Clancy novels than to warnings from the intelligence community. He did not, or could not, press the government to work on the systemic issues of how to strengthen the layered security defenses **to protect** aircraft against hijackings or put the adequacy of air defenses **against** suicide hijackers on the national policy agenda.

The methods for detecting and then warning of **surprise** attack that the U.S. government had so painstakingly developed in the decades after Pearl Harbor

did not fail; instead, they were not really tried. They were not employed to analyze the enemy that, **as the twentieth century closed**, was most likely to launch a surprise attack directly against the United States.

11.2 POLICY

The road to 9/11 again illustrates how the large, unwieldy U.S. government tended to underestimate a threat that grew ever greater. The terrorism fostered by Bin Ladin and al Qaeda was different from anything the government had faced before. The existing mechanisms for handling terrorist acts had been trial and punishment for acts committed by individuals; sanction, reprisal, deterrence, or war for acts by hostile governments. The actions of al Qaeda fit neither category. Its crimes were on a scale approaching acts of war, but they were committed by a loose, far-flung, nebulous conspiracy with no territories or citizens or assets that could be readily threatened, overwhelmed, or destroyed.

Early in 2001, DCI Tenet and Deputy Director for Operations James Pavitt gave an intelligence briefing to President-elect Bush, Vice President-elect Cheney, and Rice; it included the topic of al Qaeda. Pavitt recalled conveying that Bin Ladin was one of the **gravest** threats to the country.²⁵

Bush asked whether killing Bin Ladin would end the problem. Pavitt said he **and** the DCI had answered that killing Bin Ladin would have an impact, but would not stop the threat. The CIA later provided more formal assessments to the White House reiterating that conclusion. It added that in the long term, **the only way to** deal with the threat was to end al Qaeda's ability to use Afghanistan as a **sanctuary** for its operations.²⁶

Perhaps the most incisive of the advisors on terrorism to the new administration was the holdover Richard Clarke. Yet he admits that his policy advice, even if it had been accepted immediately and **turned into** action, would not have prevented 9/11.²⁷

We must then ask when the U.S. government had reasonable opportunities to mobilize the country for major action against al Qaeda and its Afghan sanctuary. The main opportunities came after the **new** information the U.S. government received in 1996–1997, after the embassy bombings of August 1998, after the discoveries of the Jordanian and Ressaam **plots** in late 1999, and after the attack on the USS *Cole* in October 2000.

The U.S. policy response to al Qaeda before 9/11 was essentially **defined** following the embassy bombings of August 1998. We described those decisions in chapter 4. It is worth noting that they were made **by** the Clinton administration under extremely difficult domestic political **circumstances**. Opponents were seeking the President's impeachment. In addition, in 1998–99 President Clinton was preparing the government for possible war against Serbia, and he

had **authorized** major air strikes against Iraq.

The tragedy of the embassy bombings provided an opportunity for a full examination, across the government, of the national security threat that Bin Ladin posed. Such an examination could have made clear to all that issues were at stake that were much larger than the domestic politics of the moment. But the major policy agencies of the government did not meet the threat.

The diplomatic efforts of the Department of State were largely ineffective. Al Qaeda and terrorism was just one more priority added to already-crowded agendas with countries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. After 9/11 that **changed**.

Policymakers **turned** principally to the CIA and covert action to implement policy. Before 9/11, no **agency** had more responsibility—or did more—to attack al Qaeda, **working day and night**, than the CIA. But there were limits to what the CIA was able to **achieve** in its energetic worldwide efforts to disrupt terrorist activities or use proxies to try to capture or kill Bin Ladin and his lieutenants. As early as mid-1997, one CIA officer wrote to his supervisor: “All we’re doing is holding the ring until the cavalry gets here.”²⁸

Military measures failed or were not applied. Before 9/11 the Department of Defense was not given **the mission of ending** al Qaeda’s sanctuary in Afghanistan.

Officials in both the Clinton and Bush administrations regarded a full U.S. invasion of Afghanistan as practically inconceivable before 9/11. It was never the subject of formal interagency deliberation.

Lesser forms of intervention could also have been considered. One would have been the deployment of U.S. military or intelligence personnel, or special strike forces, to Afghanistan itself or nearby—**openly, clandestinely (secretly)**, or covertly (with their connection to the United States hidden). Then the United States would no longer have been dependent on proxies to gather actionable intelligence. However, it would have needed to secure basing and overflight support from neighboring countries. A significant political, military, and intelligence effort would have been required, extending over months and perhaps years, with associated costs and risks. Given how hard it has proved to locate Bin Ladin even today when there are substantial ground forces in Afghanistan, its odds of success are hard to calculate. We have found no indication that President Clinton was offered such an intermediate choice, or that this option was given any more consideration than **the idea of invasion**.

These policy challenges are linked to the problem **of imagination** we have already discussed. Since we believe that both President Clinton and President Bush were genuinely concerned about the danger posed by al Qaeda, approaches involving more direct intervention against the sanctuary in Afghanistan apparently must have seemed—if they were considered at all—to be disproportionate to the threat.

Insight for the future is thus not easy to apply in practice. It is hardest to mount a **major effort** while a problem still seems minor. Once the danger has fully **materialized**, evident to all, mobilizing action is easier—but it then may be **too late**.

Another possibility, short of putting U.S. personnel on the ground, was to issue a blunt ultimatum **to** the Taliban, backed by a readiness to at least launch an indefinite air campaign to disable that regime's limited military capabilities and **tip the balance in** Afghanistan's ongoing civil war. The United States had warned the Taliban that they would be held **accountable** for further attacks by Bin Ladin against Afghanistan's U.S. interests. The warning had been **given** in 1998, again in late 1999, once more in the fall of 2000, and **again in the summer** of 2001. Delivering it repeatedly did not make it more effective.

As evidence of al Qaeda's responsibility for the *Cole* attack came in during November 2000, National Security Advisor Samuel Berger asked the Pentagon to develop a plan for a sustained air campaign against the Taliban. Clarke developed a paper laying out a formal, specific ultimatum. But Clarke's plan apparently did not advance to formal consideration by the Small Group of principals. We have found no indication that the idea was briefed to the new administration or that Clarke passed his paper to them, although the same team of **career officials** spanned both administrations.

After 9/11, President Bush announced that al Qaeda was responsible for the attack on the USS *Cole*. Before 9/11, neither president took any action. Bin Ladin's **inference** may well have been that attacks, at least at the level of the *Cole*, were risk free.²⁹

11.3 CAPABILITIES

Earlier chapters describe in detail the actions decided on by the Clinton and Bush administrations. Each president considered or **authorized** covert actions, a process that consumed considerable time—especially in the Clinton administration—and achieved little success beyond the collection of intelligence. After the August 1998 missile strikes in Afghanistan, naval vessels remained on station in or near the region, prepared to fire cruise missiles. General Hugh Shelton developed as many as 13 different strike options, and did not recommend any of them. The most extended debate on counterterrorism in the Bush administration before 9/11 had to do with missions for the unmanned Predator—whether to use it just to locate Bin Ladin or to wait until it was armed with a missile, so that it could find him and also attack him. Looking back, we are struck with the narrow and unimaginative menu of options for action offered to both President Clinton and President Bush.

Before 9/11, the United States **tried to solve the** al Qaeda problem with the

same government institutions and capabilities it had used in the last stages of the Cold War and its immediate aftermath. These capabilities were insufficient, but little was done to expand or reform them.

For covert action, of course, the White House depended on the Counterterrorist Center and the CIA's Directorate of Operations. Though some officers, particularly in the Bin Ladin unit, were eager for the mission, most were not. The higher management of the directorate was unenthusiastic. The CIA's capacity to conduct paramilitary operations with its own personnel was not large, and the Agency did not seek a large-scale general expansion of these capabilities before 9/11. James Pavitt, the head of this directorate, remembered that covert action, promoted by the White House, had gotten the Clandestine Service into trouble in the past. He had no desire to see this happen again. He thought, not unreasonably, that a truly serious counterterrorism campaign against an enemy of this magnitude would be business primarily for the military, not the Clandestine Service.³⁰

As for the Department of Defense, some officers in the Joint Staff were keen to help. Some in the Special Operations Command have told us that they worked on plans for using Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan and that they hoped for action orders. JCS Chairman General Shelton and General Anthony Zinni at Central Command had a different view. Shelton felt that the August 1998 attacks had proved a waste of good ordnance and thereafter consistently opposed firing expensive Tomahawk missiles merely at "jungle gym" terrorist training infrastructure.³¹ In this view, he had complete support from Defense Secretary William Cohen. Shelton was prepared to plan other options, but he was also prepared to make perfectly clear his own strong doubts about the wisdom of any military action that risked U.S. lives unless the intelligence was "actionable."³²

The high price of keeping counterterrorism policy within the restricted circle of the Counterterrorism Security Group and the highest-level principals was nowhere more apparent than in the military establishment. After the August 1998 missile strike, other members of the JCS let the press know their unhappiness that, in conformity with the Goldwater-Nichols reforms, Shelton had been the only member of the JCS to be consulted. Although follow-on military options were briefed more widely, the vice director of operations on the Joint Staff commented to us that intelligence and planning documents relating to al Qaeda arrived in a ziplock red package and that many flag and general officers never had the clearances to see its contents.³³

At no point before 9/11 was the Department of Defense fully engaged in the mission of countering al Qaeda, though this was perhaps the most dangerous foreign enemy then threatening the United States. The Clinton administration effectively relied on the CIA to take the lead in preparing long-term offensive plans against an enemy sanctuary. The Bush administration adopted this approach, although its emerging new strategy envisioned some yet unde-

fined further role for the military in addressing the problem. Within Defense, both Secretary Cohen and Secretary Donald Rumsfeld gave their principal attention to other challenges.

America's homeland defenders faced outward. NORAD itself was barely able to retain any alert bases. Its planning scenarios occasionally considered the danger of hijacked aircraft being guided to American targets, but only aircraft that were coming from overseas. We recognize that a costly change in NORAD's defense posture to deal with the danger of suicide hijackers, before such a threat had ever actually been realized, would have been a tough sell. But NORAD did not canvass available intelligence and try to make the case.

The most serious weaknesses in agency capabilities were in the domestic arena. In chapter 3 we discussed these institutions—the FBI, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the FAA, and others. The major pre-9/11 effort to strengthen domestic agency capabilities came in 2000, as part of a millennium after-action review. President Clinton and his principal advisers paid considerable attention then to border security problems, but were not able to bring about significant improvements before leaving office. The NSC-led interagency process did not effectively bring along the leadership of the Justice and Transportation departments in an agenda for institutional change.

The FBI did not have the capability to link the collective knowledge of agents in the field to national priorities. The acting director of the FBI did not learn of his Bureau's hunt for two possible al Qaeda operatives in the United States or about his Bureau's arrest of an Islamic extremist taking flight training until September 11. The director of central intelligence knew about the FBI's Moussaoui investigation weeks before word of it made its way even to the FBI's own assistant director for counterterrorism.

Other agencies deferred to the FBI. In the August 6 PDB reporting to President Bush of 70 full-field investigations related to al Qaeda, news the President said he found heartening, the CIA had simply restated what the FBI had said. No one looked behind the curtain.

The FAA's capabilities to take aggressive, anticipatory security measures were especially weak. Any serious policy examination of a suicide hijacking scenario, critiquing each of the layers of the security system, could have suggested changes to fix glaring vulnerabilities—expanding no-fly lists, searching passengers identified by the CAPPS screening system, deploying Federal Air Marshals domestically, hardening cockpit doors, alerting air crew to a different kind of hijacking than what they had been trained to expect, or adjusting the training of controllers and managers in the FAA and NORAD.

Government agencies also sometimes display a tendency to match capabilities to mission by defining away the hardest part of their job. They are often passive, accepting what are viewed as givens, including that efforts to identify and fix glaring vulnerabilities to dangerous threats would be too costly, too controversial, or too disruptive.

11.4 MANAGEMENT

Operational Management

Earlier in this report we detailed various missed opportunities to thwart the 9/11 plot. Information was not shared, sometimes inadvertently or because of legal misunderstandings. Analysis was not pooled. Effective operations were not launched. Often the handoffs of information were lost across the divide separating the foreign and domestic agencies of the government.

However the specific problems are labeled, we believe they are symptoms of the government's broader inability to adapt how it manages problems to the new challenges of the twenty-first century. The agencies are like a set of specialists in a hospital, each ordering tests, looking for symptoms, and prescribing medications. What is missing is the attending physician who makes sure they work as a team.

One missing element was effective management of transnational operations. Action officers should have drawn on all available knowledge in the government. This management should have ensured that information was shared and duties were clearly assigned across agencies, and across the foreign-domestic divide.

Consider, for example, the case of Mihdhar, Hazmi, and their January 2000 trip to Kuala Lumpur, detailed in chapter 6. In late 1999, the National Security Agency (NSA) analyzed communications associated with a man named Khalid, a man named Nawaf, and a man named Salem. Working-level officials in the intelligence community knew little more than this. But they correctly concluded that “Nawaf” and “Khalid” might be part of “an operational cadre” and that “something nefarious might be afoot.”

The NSA did not think its job was to research these identities. It saw itself as an agency to support intelligence consumers, such as CIA. The NSA tried to respond energetically to any request made. But it waited to be asked.

If NSA had been asked to try to identify these people, the agency would have started by checking its own database of earlier information from these same sources. Some of this information had been reported; some had not. But it was all readily accessible in the database. NSA's analysts would promptly have discovered who Nawaf was, that his full name might be Nawaf al Hazmi, and that he was an old friend of Khalid.

With this information and more that was available, managers could have more effectively tracked the movement of these operatives in southeast Asia. With the name “Nawaf al Hazmi,” a manager could then have asked the State Department also to check that name. State would promptly have found its own record on Nawaf al Hazmi, showing that he too had been issued a visa to visit the United States. Officials would have learned that the visa had been issued at the same place—Jeddah—and on almost the same day as the one given to Khalid al Mihdhar.

When the travelers left Kuala Lumpur for Bangkok, local officials were able to identify one of the travelers as Khalid al Mihdhar. After the flight left, they learned that one of his companions had the name Alhazmi. But the officials did not know what that name meant.

The information arrived at Bangkok too late to track these travelers as they came in. Had the **authorities** there already been **keeping an eye out for** Khalid al Mihdhar as part of a general regional or worldwide alert, they might have tracked him coming in. Had they been alerted to look for a possible companion named Nawaf al Hazmi, **they** might have noticed him too. Instead, they were notified only after Kuala Lumpur **sounded** the alarm. By that time, the travelers had already disappeared into the streets of Bangkok.

On January 12, the head **of** the CIA's al Qaeda unit told **his** bosses that surveillance in Kuala Lumpur was continuing. He may not have **known** that in fact Mihdhar and his companions had dispersed and the tracking was falling apart. U.S. officials in Bangkok **regretfully** reported the bad news on January 13. The names they had were put on a watchlist in Bangkok, so that Thai authorities might notice if the men **left the country**. On January 14, the head of the CIA's al Qaeda unit again updated his bosses, telling them that officials were continuing to track the suspicious individuals who had now dispersed to various countries.

Unfortunately, there is **no evidence of any** tracking efforts actually being undertaken by anyone after the Arabs disappeared into Bangkok. No other effort was made to create other opportunities to spot these Arab travelers in case the screen in Bangkok failed. Just from the evidence in Mihdhar's passport, one of the logical possible destinations and interdiction points would have been the United States. Yet no one alerted the INS or the FBI to look for these individuals. They arrived, unnoticed, in Los Angeles on January 15.

In early March 2000, Bangkok reported that Nawaf al Hazmi, now identified for the first time with his full name, had departed on January 15 on a United Airlines flight to Los Angeles. Since the CIA did not appreciate the significance of that name or notice the cable, we have found no evidence that this information was sent to the FBI.

Even if watchlisting had prevented or at least alerted U.S. officials to the entry of Hazmi and Mihdhar, we do not think it is likely that watchlisting, by itself, have prevented the 9/11 attacks. Al Qaeda adapted to the failure of some of its operatives to gain entry into the United States. None of these future hijackers was a pilot. Alternatively, had they been permitted entry and surveilled, some larger results might have been possible had the FBI been patient.

These are difficult **what-ifs**. The intelligence community might have judged that the risks of conducting such a prolonged intelligence operation were too high—potential terrorists might have been lost track of, for example. The pre-9/11 FBI might not have been judged capable of conducting such an operation. But surely the intelligence community would have preferred to have the chance to make these choices.

From the details of this case, or from the other opportunities we catalogue in the text box, one can see how hard it is for the intelligence community to assemble enough of the puzzle pieces gathered by different agencies to make some sense of them and then develop a fully informed joint plan. Accomplishing all this is especially difficult in a transnational case. We sympathize with the working-level officers, drowning in information and trying to decide what is important or what needs to be done when no particular action has been requested of them.

Who had the job of managing the case to make sure these things were done? One answer is that everyone had the job. The CIA's deputy director for operations, James Pavitt, stressed to us that the responsibility resided with all involved. Above all he emphasized the primacy of the field. The field had the lead in managing operations. The job of headquarters, he stressed, was to support the field, and do so without delay. If the field asked for information or other support, the job of headquarters was to get it—right away.³⁴

This is a traditional perspective on operations and, traditionally, it has had great merit. It reminded us of the FBI's pre-9/11 emphasis on the primacy of its field offices. When asked about how this traditional structure would adapt to the challenge of managing a transnational case, one that hopped from place to place as this one did, the deputy director argued that all involved were

Operational Opportunities

1. January 2000: the CIA does not watchlist Khalid al Mihdhar or notify the FBI when it learned Mihdhar possessed a valid U.S. visa.
2. January 2000: the CIA does not develop a transnational plan for tracking Mihdhar and his associates so that they could be followed to Bangkok and onward, including the United States.
3. March 2000: the CIA does not watchlist Nawaf al Hazmi or notify the FBI when it learned that he possessed a U.S. visa and had flown to Los Angeles on January 15, 2000.
4. January 2001: the CIA does not inform the FBI that a source had identified Khallad, or Tawfiq bin Attash, a major figure in the October 2000 bombing of the USS *Cole*, as having attended the meeting in Kuala Lumpur with Khalid al Mihdhar.
5. May 2001: a CIA official does not notify the FBI about Mihdhar's U.S. visa, Hazmi's U.S. travel, or Khallad's having attended the Kuala Lumpur meeting (identified when he reviewed all of the relevant traffic because of the high level of threats).

6. June 2001: FBI and CIA officials do not ensure that all relevant information regarding the Kuala Lumpur meeting was shared with the *Cole* investigators at the June 11 meeting.
7. August 2001: the FBI does not recognize the significance of the information regarding Mihdhar and Hazmi's possible arrival in the United States and thus does not take adequate action to share information, assign resources, and give sufficient priority to the search.
8. August 2001: FBI headquarters does not recognize the significance of the information regarding Moussaoui's training and beliefs and thus does not take adequate action to share information, involve higher-level officials across agencies, obtain information regarding Moussaoui's ties to al Qaeda, and give sufficient priority to determining what Moussaoui might be planning.
9. August 2001: the CIA does not focus on information that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed is a key al Qaeda lieutenant or connect information identifying KSM as the "Mukhtar" mentioned in other reports to the analysis that could have linked "Mukhtar" with Ramzi Binalshibh and Moussaoui.
10. August 2001: the CIA and FBI do not connect the presence of Mihdhar, Hazmi, and Moussaoui to the general threat reporting about imminent attacks.

responsible for making it work. Pavitt underscored the responsibility of the particular field location where the suspects were being tracked at any given time. On the other hand, he also said that the Counterterrorist Center was supposed to manage all the moving parts, while what happened on the ground was the responsibility of managers in the field.³⁵

Headquarters tended to support and facilitate, trying to make sure everyone was in the loop. From time to time a particular post would push one way, or headquarters would urge someone to do something. But headquarters never really took responsibility for the successful management of this case. Hence the managers at CIA headquarters did not realize that omissions in planning had occurred, and they scarcely knew that the case had fallen apart.

The director of the Counterterrorist Center at the time, Cofer Black, recalled to us that this operation was one among many and that, at the time, it was "considered interesting, but not heavy water yet." He recalled the failure to get the word to Bangkok fast enough, but has no evident recollection of why the case then dissolved, unnoticed.³⁶

The next level down, the director of the al Qaeda unit in CIA at the time recalled that he did not think it was his job to direct what should or should not be done. He did not pay attention when the individuals dispersed and **things fell apart**. There was no conscious decision to stop the operation after **the trail was temporarily lost in Bangkok**. He acknowledged, however, that perhaps there had been a letdown for his overworked staff after the extreme tension and long hours in the period of the millennium alert.³⁷

The details of this case illuminate real management challenges, past and future. The U.S. government must find a way of pooling intelligence and using it to guide the planning of and assignment of responsibilities for *joint operations* involving organizations as disparate as **the CIA, the FBI, the State Department, the military, and the agencies involved in homeland security**.

Institutional Management

Beyond those day-to-day tasks of bridging the foreign-domestic **divide and matching intelligence with plans**, the challenges include broader **management issues** pertaining to how the top leaders of the government set priorities and allocate resources. Once again it is useful to illustrate the problem by examining the CIA, since before 9/11 this agency's role was so central in the government's counterterrorism efforts.

On December 4, 1998, DCITenet issued a **directive** to several CIA officials and his deputy for community management, **stating**: "We are at war. I want no resources or people spared in this effort, either inside CIA or the Community."³⁸ The memorandum had little overall effect on mobilizing the CIA or the intelligence community.³⁹

The memo was addressed only to CIA officials and the deputy for community management, Joan Dempsey. She faxed the memo to **the heads of the major intelligence agencies** after removing covert action sections. Only a **handful** of people received it. The NSA director at the time, Lieutenant General Kenneth Minihan, believed the memo applied only to the CIA and not the NSA, because no one had informed him of any NSA shortcomings. For their part, CIA officials thought the memorandum was intended for the rest of the intelligence community, given that they were already doing all they could and believed that the rest of the community **needed to pull its weight**.⁴⁰

The episode indicates some of the limitations of the DCI's authority over the direction and priorities of the **intelligence community**, especially its elements within the Department of Defense. The DCI has to direct agencies without controlling them. He does not receive an appropriation for their activities, and therefore does not control their **purse strings**. He has little insight into how they spend their resources. Congress attempted to strengthen the DCI's authority in 1996 by creating the positions of deputy DCI for community management and assistant DCIs for collection, analysis and production, and administration. But the authority of these positions is limited, and the vision of central management clearly has not been realized.

The DCI did not develop a management strategy for a war against Islamist terrorism before 9/11. Such a management strategy would define the capabilities the intelligence community must acquire for such a war—from language training to collection systems to analysts. Such a management strategy would necessarily extend beyond the CTC to the components that feed its expertise and support its operations, linked transparently to counterterrorism objectives. It would then detail the proposed expenditures and organizational changes required to acquire and implement these capabilities.

DCI Tenet and his deputy director for operations told us they did have a management strategy for a war on terrorism. It was **to rebuild the CIA**. They said the CIA as a whole had been **badly damaged** by prior **budget** constraints and that **capabilities needed to be restored across the board**. Indeed, the CTC budget had not been cut while the budgets had been **slashed in** many other parts of the Agency. By restoring funding across the CIA, **a rising tide** would lift all boats. They also stressed the synergy between improvements of every part of the Agency and the capabilities that the CTC or stations **overseas** could draw on in the war on terror.⁴¹

As some officials pointed out to us, there is a **tradeoff** in this management approach. In an attempt to rebuild everything at once, the highest priority efforts might not get the maximum support that they need. Furthermore, this approach attempted to channel relatively strong outside support for combating terrorism into backing for across-the-board funding **increases**. Proponents of the counterterrorism agenda might respond by being **less inclined to loosen** the purse strings than they would have been if offered a convincing counterterrorism budget strategy. The DCI's management strategy was also **focused** mainly on the CIA.

Lacking a management strategy for the war on terrorism or ways to see how funds were being spent across the community, DCI Tenet and his aides found it difficult to develop an overall intelligence community budget **for a war** on terrorism.

Responsibility for domestic intelligence gathering on terrorism was vested solely in the FBI, yet during almost all of the Clinton administration the relationship between the FBI Director and the President was nearly nonexistent. The FBI Director would not communicate directly with the President. His key personnel shared very little information with the National Security Council and the rest of the national security community. As a consequence, one of the critical working relationships in the counterterrorism effort was broken.

The Millennium Exception

Before concluding our narrative, we offer a reminder, and an explanation, of the one period in which the government as a whole seemed to be acting in concert to deal with terrorism—the last weeks of December 1999 preceding the millennium.

In the period between December 1999 and early January 2000, information about terrorism flowed widely and abundantly. The flow from the FBI was particularly remarkable because the FBI at other times shared almost no information. That from the intelligence community was also remarkable, because some of it reached officials—local airport managers and local police departments—who had not seen such information before and would not see it again before 9/11, if then. And the terrorist threat, in the United States even more than abroad, engaged the frequent attention of high officials in the executive branch and leaders in both houses of Congress.

Why was this so? Most obviously, it was because everyone was already on edge with the millennium and possible computer programming glitches (“Y2K”) that might obliterate records, shut down power and communication lines, or otherwise disrupt daily life. Then, Jordanian authorities arrested 16 al Qaeda terrorists planning a number of bombings in that country. Those in custody included two U.S. citizens. Soon after, an alert Customs agent caught Ahmed Ressam bringing explosives across the Canadian border with the apparent intention of blowing up Los Angeles airport. He was found to have confederates on both sides of the border.

These were not events whispered about in highly classified intelligence dailies or FBI interview memos. The information was in all major newspapers and highlighted in network television news. Though the Jordanian arrests only made page 13 of the *New York Times*, they were featured on every evening newscast. The arrest of Ressam was on front pages, and the original story and its follow-ups dominated television news for a week. FBI field offices around the country were swamped by calls from concerned citizens. Representatives of the Justice Department, the FAA, local police departments, and major airports had microphones in their faces whenever they showed themselves.⁴²

After the millennium alert, the government relaxed. Counterterrorism went back to being a secret preserve for segments of the FBI, the Counterterrorist Center, and the Counterterrorism Security Group. But the experience showed that the government was capable of mobilizing itself for an alert against terrorism. While one factor was the preexistence of widespread concern about Y2K, another, at least equally important, was simply shared information. Everyone knew not only of an abstract threat but of at least one terrorist who had been arrested in the United States. Terrorism had a face—that of Ahmed Ressam—and Americans from Vermont to southern California went on the watch for his like.

In the summer of 2001, DCI Tenet, the Counterterrorist Center, and the Counterterrorism Security Group did their utmost to sound a loud alarm, its basis being intelligence indicating that al Qaeda planned something big. But the millennium phenomenon was not repeated. FBI field offices apparently saw no abnormal terrorist activity, and headquarters was not shaking them up.

Between May 2001 and September 11, there was very little in newspapers

or on television to heighten anyone's concern about terrorism. Front-page stories touching on the subject dealt with the windup of trials dealing with the East Africa embassy bombings and Ressaam. All this reportage looked backward, describing problems satisfactorily resolved. Back-page notices told of tightened security at embassies and military installations abroad and government cautions against travel to the Arabian Peninsula. All the rest was secret.

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