

Correspondence

How Intelligent Is Intelligence Reform?

Joshua Rovner and
Austin Long
Amy B. Zegart

To the Editors:

Amy Zegart argues that the U.S. intelligence community suffered an “adaptation failure” that left it unprepared to deal with the terrorist threat after the Cold War.¹ The core of this apparent failure was its inability to reorganize in response to a radically changed international setting, despite recommendations for reform from a number of prominent commissions and members of Congress. Zegart further argues that this bureaucratic sclerosis resulted from the nature of organizations, the rational self-interests of national security officials, and the decentralized structure of American federalism.²

Zegart is one of a handful of political scientists to look seriously at intelligence issues, and her study raises several important questions. Her model of bureaucratic inertia is theoretically compelling and deserves close scrutiny, even though we disagree with some of her conclusions about intelligence reform. The large organizational changes currently under way in the U.S. intelligence establishment have proceeded with insufficient attention from the security studies community. We hope that Zegart’s analysis inspires more academic debate on the relationship between intelligence, foreign policy, and national security.

In this commentary we critique three aspects of the article. First, its logic rests on an unjustified assumption about the need to reorganize in the face of new security challenges. Second, the article reveals an overriding preference for centralization, regardless of changes in the international environment. Third, we challenge her interpretation of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as the culmination of the intelligence community’s failure to adapt. In reality, the community provided accurate strategic warning of the terrorist threat and good tactical warning of the impending attacks. We conclude with a different argument: September 11 was not an intelligence failure; it was a national failure.

Joshua Rovner is a doctoral candidate in political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a member of the MIT Security Studies Program. He is also a lecturer in foreign policy at the College of the Holy Cross. Austin Long is a doctoral candidate in political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a member of the MIT Security Studies Program, and an adjunct researcher at the RAND Corporation.

Amy B. Zegart is Associate Professor of Public Policy at the School of Public Affairs at the University of California, Los Angeles.

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1. Amy B. Zegart, “September 11 and the Adaptation Failure of U.S. Intelligence Agencies,” *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Spring 2005), pp. 78–111. All further references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.
 2. Zegart uses this model elsewhere to explain structural inefficiencies in the CIA, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the National Security Council. Amy B. Zegart, *Flawed By Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).

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ADAPTATION IS NOT REORGANIZATION

Zegart criticizes U.S. intelligence agencies for failing to reorganize following the end of the Cold War. The demise of the Soviet Union created a host of complex security problems for the intelligence community. The growing problem of transnational terrorism was particularly troubling, and it stood to reason that the intelligence community had to adapt in response to the rise of militant Islamists such as Osama bin Laden. But despite many efforts to refocus on the terrorist threat, it failed to undertake the necessary reorganization. Zegart notes that at least a dozen independent commissions drew similar conclusions about problems in the community during the 1990s. They criticized its lack of human intelligence assets and lack of “corporateness,” its flawed personnel systems and insufficient information sharing, and its inability to set priorities. All of these problems stemmed from the community’s Byzantine bureaucratic structure, composed of more than a dozen separate agencies under the extremely limited powers of the director of central intelligence (DCI). The result was that the United States was “especially vulnerable to a catastrophic terrorist attack” (p. 88).

The basic premise of Zegart’s argument, therefore, is that adaptation requires reorganization. If she is correct, then fundamental changes in the international environment after the Cold War should have led to structural changes in the intelligence community. Unfortunately, this critical assumption is never justified in the article, even though it is not self-evident that organizational design is the most important determinant of organizational performance. Moreover, it is not obvious that there existed some a priori structure best suited for the challenge of transnational terrorism.

Near the conclusion of her article, Zegart correctly observes that the problems that ail the intelligence community cannot be solved through structural changes alone. “Although it is true that U.S intelligence agencies have been hobbled for decades by a dysfunctional structure,” she writes, “this article suggests that the inability of U.S. intelligence agencies to adapt to the terrorist threat also stems from organizational routines and cultures that are highly resistant to change” (p. 110). This claim, however, is inconsistent with the spirit and substance of her article. Earlier, Zegart notes the “critical deficiencies in the CIA’s structure, prioritization systems, human intelligence capabilities, and personnel systems” that collectively led to the adaptation failure of September 11 (p. 107). Two of these problems, prioritization and capabilities, were mainly the products of policy inattention and slashed budgets (p. 101). The other problems were caused by structural diversity within the CIA and in the community at large, and progress was impossible without stronger central authority. DCI George Tenet called for temporary rotations to other parts of the intelligence community, for example, to increase intracommunity coordination. But as Zegart notes, “Every agency, including the CIA, ignored him” (p. 105). Thus, despite her criticism of the 9/11 Commission and the Intelligence Reform and Prevention Act for portraying “organizational deficiencies as structural flaws,” the article actually supports this misperception.

Because Zegart conflates adaptation with reorganization, her argument relies on an extremely flawed measure of institutional performance. As evidence of the intelligence community’s failure to adapt, Zegart points to its lethargic response to the recommendations of highly visible public commissions on reform. “Of 340 recommendations for changes in the intelligence community,” she writes, “only 35 were successfully implemented, and 268 . . . resulted in no action at all” (p. 88). By themselves, these numbers

are close to meaningless, especially because many of the 340 total recommendations were redundant. Should Americans be upset about the failure to implement the majority of these recommendations? Or should they be satisfied that the intelligence community undertook almost three dozen separate reforms? Did the community implement the right changes? Did it have good reason to reject the others? These are qualitative judgments, not issues that can be settled by crude arithmetic. Intelligence agencies collect and analyze information for policymakers. They ought to be judged on their ability to perform these tasks, not on their willingness to reorganize at the behest of blue-ribbon panels.

Zegart includes just one example of genuine failure. The CIA did not put September 11 hijacker Khalid al-Mihdhar on the State Department's terrorist watch list until August 2001, even though the agency originally tracked him in January 2000. To Zegart, this was a "chilling example of the subtle yet powerful effects of organization" (p. 78). To be sure, the failure to forward al-Mihdhar's information was a serious error, but it had little to do with the effects of organization. CIA personnel mistakenly withheld pertinent information from other agencies on at least two occasions, but this was primarily the result of human error, not any legal or institutional barriers. Moreover, al-Mihdhar was eventually placed on the watch list because of the cooperation of a CIA officer and an FBI agent. Once they realized the oversight, they quickly moved to forward his information to the State Department.³ We do not deny that structural problems affect coordination within the community, as they do in any large bureaucracy. They did not, however, prohibit interagency cooperation in this case. And if critics are going to censure intelligence agencies for failing to track possible terrorists before September 11, it is important to know whether there was a systematic failure to provide names for the watch list. By focusing only on al-Mihdhar, Zegart simply restates the oft-heard claim about the need for common routines to increase data sharing. Ironically, the complaint about the lack of such a standard operating procedure is at odds with her discussion of the stultifying effects of bureaucratic procedure on organizational change (pp. 96–97).

Zegart's argument about the failure to adapt is inconsistent with almost all the evidence she presents. The article lists a number of steps that the intelligence community took to adapt to terrorism and the danger of al-Qaida during the 1990s (pp. 82–85). It created new task forces to better understand the threat; it quintupled the counter-terrorist budget; and it prominently placed al-Qaida and transnational terrorism in its annual threat reports beginning in 1994. All of these actions produced results. "In sum," Zegart writes, "the U.S. intelligence community's assessments of a growing terrorist threat did not go unnoticed. Senior policymakers across the national security establishment appear to have agreed with them" (p. 85). This does not look like an adaptive failure. Indeed, Zegart acknowledges that the community refocused on the terrorist problem and delivered accurate warning intelligence to policymakers about the danger posed by al-Qaida. Her conclusion makes sense only if adaptation is measured in terms of organizational change rather than organizational performance.

3. *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), pp. 266–267, 269–270.

CENTRALIZATION THEN AND NOW

Zegart has a strong preference for centralization, regardless of changes in the international environment. She approves of the recommendations for better data sharing, a more corporate spirit in the community, more uniform personnel policies, and a stronger mechanism for setting priorities. These reforms all suggest the need for a stronger central authority (see especially pp. 100–101, 103–105). Probably the most common complaint after September 11 was that the DCI had nominal authority over the intelligence community but no real power over the majority of its resources. The DCI was supposed to coordinate all of the intelligence agencies, but the Pentagon controlled the most expensive intelligence programs and, according to public estimates, well in excess of 80 percent of the total intelligence budget.⁴ Even the recent creation of a director of national intelligence fails to fully solve this problem, as the DNI cannot legally “abrogate the statutory responsibilities” of the secretary of defense.⁵

Perhaps the intelligence community should have pursued centralization after the end of the Cold War. Centralization might have improved coordination and helped the intelligence agencies achieve a unity of effort in the common counterterrorist mission, breaking down institutional and cultural barriers that limited the quality of cooperation. Although this is certainly plausible, Zegart makes the same argument about U.S. intelligence during the Cold War (p. 99). In her article as well as in earlier work, Zegart contends that the CIA was never able to achieve its stated mission to act as a clearinghouse for intelligence from around the community. The ideal intelligence agency in a bipolar world would have been able to “cull and distill raw intelligence from an array of other organizations and distribute insightful analyses to top policymakers in a timely fashion.” The CIA failed to achieve this ideal, however, due to specific errors written into its charter. Thus the agency was never optimally designed to meet the Soviet threat, and it was never able to overcome its structural flaws. The Central Intelligence Agency was central in name alone.⁶

If centralization made sense in an era of bipolar competition between superpowers, however, why does it make sense today? Zegart does not address this question, even though it challenges the central logic of her article. And because there is no clear line between international changes and rational reorganization, we can argue for several plausible designs. It might be, for example, that decentralization is the appropriate organizational response to the rise of transnational threats. Decentralized intelligence offers several potential benefits. Greater autonomy for field operators would allow them to recruit unsavory informants—even terrorists—without fear of reprimand from the home office. Loosening centralized standards would also favor entrepreneurial analysts who prefer to freely communicate with their peers and policy counterparts instead of having to follow strict guidelines on communication. This informal interaction increases analysts’ understanding of policymakers’ needs and concerns, as well as provides analysts’ with the candid views of their peers, which are often unavailable given

4. See Stephen Dagget, “The U.S. Intelligence Budget: A Basic Overview,” Congressional Research Service Report RS21945, September 29, 2004.

5. *Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004*, P.L. 108-458, sec. 1018.

6. Zegart, *Flawed By Design*, pp. 221–222.

layers of bureaucratic procedure. We doubt that increased centralization would encourage this kind of personal initiative.

The contradiction between adaptation and Zegart's consistent preference for centralization throws doubt on her conclusions about intelligence reform. Despite radical changes in the international setting, Zegart favors the same organizational principle.

A NATIONAL FAILURE

Finally, Zegart's claim "that the U.S. intelligence community showed a stunning inability to adapt to the rise of terrorism" is demonstrably false (p. 78). The performance of intelligence agencies was far from perfect, but in a time of shrinking budgets and policymaker disinterest, they made significant changes to cope with terrorism.⁷ The blame is therefore misplaced: September 11 was a national failure, and responsibility must be shouldered in large part by policymakers. The intelligence community gave specific warnings about al-Qaida and proposed a variety of counterterrorist operations before the attacks, most of which were ignored or halted by policymakers.

To assess the performance of the intelligence community, we judge the quality of strategic and tactical warning intelligence on terrorism during the 1990s. Strategic warning alerts policymakers to the emergence of threats and the broad contours of how attacks might occur, whereas tactical warning alerts them to imminent dangers, providing the time and place of the expected strike.⁸ With respect to the threat of al-Qaida, strategic warning was available and accurate. The CIA's Counterterrorism Center (CTC), itself an organizational adaptation initiated in 1986, formed a special unit devoted to tracking Osama bin Laden in January 1996. This unit was given the status of a traditional CIA "station," a designation conferring on it the administrative rank of a country or major city station overseas (e.g., Moscow station).⁹ By Zegart's own definition, this was clearly an organizational "adaptation" rather than merely a "change." That a single terrorist was assigned the status reserved for countries during the Cold War demonstrates the priority given to terrorism generally and bin Laden specifically.

The result was a broad appreciation of the growing danger of an al-Qaida attack. There was internal debate within the CIA about the extent of bin Laden's capabilities, but the general contours of the threat were repeatedly provided to policymakers. In 1999 DCI Tenet ranked bin Laden the number two threat to the United States, second

7. Although the intelligence budget is classified, the community clearly suffered serious personnel and resource cuts in the 1990s. By the end of the decade, for example, the number of analysts in the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence had been reduced by 22 percent. The Directorate of Operations, which is responsible for human intelligence collection, had its case officer workforce reduced by 25 percent from peak Cold War levels and closed stations in Afghanistan and elsewhere. See Roger Z. George, "Fixing the Problem of Analytical Mind-Sets: Alternative Analysis," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Autumn 2004), pp. 385-404, at p. 391; and Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 317.

8. Robert D. Vickers Jr., "The State of Warning Today," *Defense Intelligence Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 9-15.

9. Coll, *Ghost Wars*, p. 319.

only to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).¹⁰ In early 2001 he reiterated and expanded on these concerns, noting that “terrorists are seeking out ‘softer’ targets that provide opportunities for mass casualties.”¹¹

Tactical warning intelligence was less conclusive, but the intelligence community was hardly ineffectual. Providing reliable tactical warning is an extremely difficult challenge. Instead of simply alerting policymakers to new threats, tactical warning intelligence provides precise details about where, when, and how the enemy plans to attack. As the level of specificity increases, so too does the signal-to-noise problem.¹² The need for precision puts analysts in the unenviable position of having to isolate genuine warning signs (the signal) from large amounts of meaningless information (the background noise). Given these inherent difficulties and the complex nature of transnational terrorism, the intelligence community did a fairly good job at providing tactical warning before September 11. Zegart notes the failures on tracking al-Mihdhar, but she does not note the massive surge in tactical warning in the spring of 2001. Steve Coll, in his indispensable history *Ghost Wars*, notes that in 2001 the FBI issued 216 warnings, 6 mentioning airports or airlines. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) issued 15 other warnings specifically about threats to airlines. In June 2001 the deputy director of the CTC noted he was deeply concerned about the likelihood that upcoming attacks would be “larger and more deadly.”¹³

These tactical warnings were often vague, but nonetheless alarming. By August the possibility of bin Laden operatives hijacking airplanes appeared in the President’s Daily Brief (PDB), though without specifics. The FAA’s intelligence unit reported that a “terrorist group might try to hijack a commercial jet and slam it into a U.S. landmark.”¹⁴ The FAA also received about 200 daily intelligence reports during the summer of 2001 from other intelligence agencies and opened more than 1,200 files on possible threats. It was during this period that the CTC noted that al-Mihdhar and fellow hijacker Nawaf al-Hazmi were not on watch lists, prompting the CTC to send urgent messages to the State Department, Immigration, Customs, and the FBI.¹⁵ The intelligence community gave policymakers good reason to fear a near-term terror attack.

In addition to providing a large amount of strategic and tactical warning, the CIA pursued several possible solutions to the growing al-Qaida threat. The agency proposed covert operations against bin Laden during the 1990s; successfully renewed ties

10. “Statement of the Director of Central Intelligence George J. Tenet as Prepared for Delivery before the Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing on Current and Projected National Security Threats,” 106th Cong., 1st sess., February 2, 1999, http://www.cia.gov/cia/public_affairs/speeches/1999/ps020299.html.

11. “Statement by Director of Central Intelligence George J. Tenet before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on the ‘Worldwide Threat 2001: National Security in a Changing World,’” 107th Cong., 1st sess., February 7, 2001, http://www.cia.gov/cia/public_affairs/speeches/2001/UNCLASWWT_02072001.html.

12. Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1962).

13. Quoted in Coll, *Ghost Wars*, pp. 559–560.

14. Eric Lichtblau, “F.A.A. Alerted on Qaeda in ‘98, 9/11 Panel Said,” *New York Times*, September 14, 2005.

15. Coll, *Ghost Wars*, pp. 561–563.

with the leader of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, Ahmad Shah Massoud; and sought to develop an armed version of the Predator drone with which to attack bin Laden.¹⁶ Neither policymakers nor the American people were willing to do much more.

Without consistent political backing, these CIA efforts proved disappointing. Covert operations were suspended due to the risk of failure, which policymakers simply did not want to incur.¹⁷ An Afghan “Bay of Pigs” was the last thing an embattled Bill Clinton needed in the late 1990s. The CIA’s ties to Massoud would be critical when the United States eventually went to war in Afghanistan; but without major military support before September 11, there was little the Northern Alliance could do against the Taliban.¹⁸ U.S. policymakers, already hesitant regarding covert action, never seriously considered a land invasion of Afghanistan. Nor was there any clamor for such action from security studies experts or the public at large. The only significant White House response to the rise of al-Qaida was to launch cruise missiles at training camps near Khost and suspected WMD sites in Africa. And even that desultory action was criticized in Washington. Rather than calling for more and bigger strikes, some congressional Republicans accused the president of trying to divert attention from his ongoing impeachment ordeal.¹⁹

Under these circumstances, what more could the intelligence community have done? The answer is very little, because the community is rightly under the control of elected officials. Much has been made of the lack of response in the community to DCI Tenet’s “declaration of war” on bin Laden in late 1998. This criticism misses the bigger point: only a large and sustained conventional military effort had a realistic chance of disrupting or destroying al-Qaida. The DCI could not authorize this sort of action without presidential approval and the support of the National Security Council. Zegart interprets the failure to respond to Tenet’s declaration as evidence of the need for more centralization (p. 83). In fact, all it shows is that the DCI did not have the power to declare war on behalf of the United States.

The president and Congress are responsible for setting national priorities. Intelligence agencies and military services implement policy according to guidance from elected officials. This basic point seems lost on those who blame intelligence for not taking more action against terrorism. By way of comparison, imagine the response if the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had “declared war” on terrorism in 1998, and the services had actually responded. It would have been a civil-military disaster straight from *Seven Days in May* or *Dr. Strangelove*. And yet, with the benefit of hindsight, critics seem to wish that the intelligence community had engaged in actions that were not supported by policymakers or voters.

September 11 was thus a national failure. Policymakers, analysts, scholars, and citizens alike must share the blame. As late as August 2001, launching a massive military

16. Coll provides extensive discussion of these efforts. See *ibid.*, chaps. 21–30. Unfortunately, the armed Predator remained a work in progress in September 2001. *Ibid.*, pp. 543–545.

17. For examples of the objections raised, see *ibid.*, pp. 395–396, 445–450, 464–469, 497–503.

18. See Gary C. Schroen, *First In: An Insider’s Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan* (New York: Presidio, 2005).

19. Guy Gugliotta and Juliet Eilperin, “Tough Response Appeals to Critics of President; Several Question Clinton’s Timing of Raids,” *Washington Post*, August 21, 1998.

offensive in Afghanistan to smash the Taliban and capture or kill bin Laden was unthinkable. Even more modest changes, like the restrictions on air travel we now routinely endure, were highly unlikely. Yet it would have taken such measures to have a reasonable chance of preventing the al-Qaida attacks.

Nonetheless, it is comforting to blame the intelligence community. It is tempting to believe that poor intelligence organization led to the critical lapses that allowed al-Qaida to strike. Bad organizational design inhibited data sharing and coordination, Americans are told, and the community could not discover which four planes (out of thousands) would be used as weapons against the United States. Focusing on narrow intelligence failures acts like a palliative: it suggests that a simple organizational fix will relieve Americans' sense of national insecurity. No wonder that the 9/11 commission, which led the charge for changes to the structure of U.S. intelligence, remains so popular.²⁰ Elected officials are particularly keen on intelligence reform, as it absolves them of responsibility and offers the illusion that they are *doing something* about the terrorist threat. However, the hard facts are seldom comforting, this case no less than others. During the 1990s the intelligence community watched as al-Qaida became a large, well-financed, and flexible organization committed to killing Americans. But in the warm glow of the post-Cold War period, elected officials from both parties were unwilling to take the unpalatable but necessary steps that, with hindsight, might have stopped bin Laden. This is the real adaptation failure of September 11.

—Joshua Rovner

—Austin Long

Cambridge, Massachusetts

The Author Replies:

I thank Joshua Rovner and Austin Long for their spirited critique of my article. As they note, the security studies community has paid insufficient attention to the organization and operation of U.S. intelligence agencies. Particularly in light of the September 11 terrorist attacks and the Iraq war, few issues are more important and less understood. The Rovner-Long critique, however, is more provocative than plausible. Their three criticisms ignore much of the factual record, misunderstand and mischaracterize my argument, and suggest an unconvincing alternative: U.S. intelligence agencies performed remarkably well before September 11, but everybody else in the United States—elected officials, experts, and the American public—did not.

WHAT IS ADAPTATION?

Rovner and Long's first criticism is that I judge adaptation too narrowly, counting only structural reorganization and using "meaningless" quantitative analysis. Even a cursory reading of my article suggests this is not the case. I explicitly defined "adapta-

20. See the survey results in Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "9/11 Commission Has Bipartisan Support," July 20, 2004, <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=2219>. See also "Reliable Voices for Reform," editorial, *New York Times*, June 9, 2005.

tion" in broad terms as *any* response that enables an organization to keep pace with its environmental demands. "Organizations are always changing," I wrote, "The key issue is whether those changes matter, or more precisely, whether the rate of change within an organization keeps pace (or lags behind) the rate of change in its external environment."¹

In the CIA's case, moreover, I made clear that structural problems constituted only one aspect of the agency's deficiencies. Examining every major unclassified study of U.S. intelligence and counterterrorism from 1991 to 2001, I found four commonly identified weaknesses: the intelligence community's lack of corporateness, a lack of intelligence priorities, weak human intelligence, and personnel problems such as language skills. Only one of these problems—corporateness—cried out for changing wiring diagrams. The other three required changing minds, habits, and career incentives, as well.

Putting accuracy matters aside, the Rovner-Long critique appears to be driven by two fundamental differences of opinion. The first is conceptual. Rovner and Long see adaptation as an absolute measure of organizational change. In their view, if organizations are doing big new things, they are, ipso facto, adapting. I take a different view, treating adaptation as a relative measure of an agency's responsiveness to its environment. Agency heads can tote long lists of new initiatives, but the true test is whether those initiatives enable the organization to respond effectively to its challenges in the world. As I wrote, the question for evaluating public sector agencies is not: "Are you doing anything differently today? But: Are you doing enough differently today to meet the challenges you face?"² This conceptual difference helps explain why we agree that U.S. intelligence agencies undertook some important changes during the 1990s but reach opposite conclusions about whether they adapted to the rise of terrorism.

The second difference is methodological. Rovner and Long advocate measuring adaptation the old way—relying exclusively on qualitative assessments of organizational performance based on 20/20 hindsight. This approach is easier, but it has serious potential drawbacks: it reconstructs history after-the-fact rather than providing policymakers with a useful perspective as events unfold; it relies on personal judgments, which can lead to error and bias; and it often employs selective evidence. Rovner and Long unwittingly illustrate the pitfalls of this approach in their commentary. Noting that the intelligence community provided good tactical warning before September 11, they write, "The possibility of bin Laden operatives hijacking airplanes appeared in the President's Daily Brief (PDB)" by August 2001. This sounds convincing until one considers what Rovner and Long omit. The August 6, 2001, PDB to which they refer³ gave the president old information,⁴ wrong information,⁵ and false assurances about the ex-

1. Amy Zegart, "September 11 and the Adaptation Failure of U.S. Intelligence Agencies," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Spring 2005), p. 82.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

3. "Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in U.S.," President's Daily Brief, August 6, 2001, declassified April 10, 2004, printed in *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), pp. 261–262.

4. A word count finds that 82 percent of the document (the entire first page) discusses terrorist reporting from 1993 to 1999, while just 18 percent addresses current intelligence.

5. The PDB's errors included FBI information about "patterns of suspicious activity" which turned out to be Yemeni tourists photographing New York buildings. See Office of the Press Secre-

tent of FBI counterterrorism investigations inside the United States.⁶ In addition, it failed to provide critical pieces of current intelligence that individuals inside the intelligence community believed to be important: namely, that future hijackers Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi had attended a major al-Qaida meeting in Malaysia with a bin Laden lieutenant;⁷ that al-Mihdhar held a U.S. visa⁸ and al-Hazmi had already traveled to the United States;⁹ and that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, one of bin Laden's most trusted operatives, was recruiting terrorists to travel and to plan activities in the United States.¹⁰ Seen in fuller context, the PDB provides more compelling evidence of tactical warning failure, not success.

Intelligence adaptation failure is more usefully examined by a multifaceted methodology that combines quantitative and qualitative analyses and explicitly considers both contemporary and retrospective assessments. To be sure, every methodology has weaknesses. Quantitative analysis often misses vital nuance, and contemporary assessments can be tricky. This multifaceted approach, however, combines qualitative depth with quantitative breadth, and it deliberately isolates what decisionmakers knew then from what they know now.

In the article, I developed a pre-September 11 picture of how intelligence officials and policymakers perceived the terrorist threat and organizational deficiencies by examining their public statements and reports issued by all major unclassified studies of intelligence and counterterrorism from 1991 to 2001. Qualitative analysis found that the reports agreed on the intelligence community's greatest deficiencies: poor integration, weak human intelligence, an inability to prioritize issues and resources, and inadequate personnel systems that fueled agency parochialism and failed to develop necessary skills. Quantitative analysis revealed that almost none of the recommendations to address these problems were implemented before September 11. Finally, retrospective analyses by the 9/11 commission and the congressional intelligence committees identified these same problems as crucial failings that left the United States vulnerable to the September 11 terrorist attacks. This is what Rovner and Long call my "extremely flawed measure of institutional performance."

In their eagerness to find adaptation success, Rovner and Long overlook a great deal. They demand qualitative judgments but ignore the ones I offer on pages 100 to 105. They charge, incorrectly, that reform recommendations came only from "highly visible public commissions" and therefore should be discounted. They miss the idea that redundant recommendations strengthen the case for adaptation failure, showing how dif-

tary, White House, "Background Briefing via Conference Call on the President's PDB of August 6, 2001," April 10, 2004, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/04/20040410-6.html>; and Office of the Press Secretary, White House, "Fact Sheet: The August 6, 2001 PDB," issued April 10, 2004, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/04/print/20040410-5.html>.

6. The 9/11 Commission, 10th Public Hearing, "Law Enforcement and the Intelligence Community," April 13, 2004, http://www.9-11commission.gov/archive/hearing10/9-11Commission_Hearing_2004-04-13.pdf.

7. *Joint Inquiry into Intelligence Community Activities before and after the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001*, report of the U.S. Select Committee on Intelligence and U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, S. Report No. 107-351, H. Report No. 107-792, 107th Cong., 2d sess., December 2002 [hereafter *Joint Inquiry Final Report*], p. 149.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

ferent people in different studies came to the same conclusions. And despite my detailed discussion of unimplemented reforms, they cling to the implemented ones, suggesting that the adoption of 35 out of 340 recommendations might be good news. In fact, these were among the least significant reforms. One fully implemented FBI recommendation, for example, urged that “efforts should be made to explore the feasibility of instituting a capability to exchange unclassified investigative material among law enforcement and the intelligence community.”¹¹ This is hardly a get-tough standard for improving information sharing. Had Rovner and Long read the article more carefully, I doubt they would have so readily dismissed my findings as “crude arithmetic” or raised the laughable idea that Americans should be happy that “almost three dozen separate reforms” were implemented before September 11. When real reform might have prevented a national tragedy, ineffective reform is hardly cause for celebration.

TO CENTRALIZE OR NOT TO CENTRALIZE?

Rovner and Long’s second criticism is that I favor the centralization of intelligence. I plead guilty. It is true that I preferred centralization both during and after the Cold War, despite changes in the international environment. Three reasons explain why. First, the intelligence community has never worked as a coherent whole. Critics who contend that U.S. intelligence agencies are poorly suited for the post–Cold War world are only half-right: these agencies were not well designed for the Cold War, either. As many have noted, the “intelligence community” was never a community at all, but a disjointed assortment of agencies created at different times for different purposes without strong unifying authorities or structures; common policies, personnel systems, or incentives; and cultures to ensure that they operated in a coordinated fashion. Second, although the United States’ enemy has changed, the core function of the intelligence community—collecting, analyzing, and disseminating information to policymakers about threats to U.S. national security and interests without politics or prejudice—has not. If anything, the rise of transnational terrorism only underscores the need for better coordination across agencies. Third, there is the issue of scale. I agree with Rovner and Long that intelligence reform should encourage individuals to take initiative. Empowering someone to recruit a source or share a communication is good; establishing incentives and cultures that encourage all intelligence officers to take initiative is better. Although decentralization may help solve some problems, centralization usually offers a better hope of instituting change on a broader scale.

Rovner and Long are right to suggest that centralization will not cure all ills. Two comments are in order. First, centralization and decentralization are not mutually exclusive organizing principles. The landscape is filled with organizations in which strong central authority and delegated decisionmaking coexist. General Electric is perhaps the most successful and well-known example. Serving customers in 100 countries with 300,000 employees in businesses ranging from television to financial services to jet engine manufacturing, GE managers have historically held wide latitude to manage their own operations. Nobody, however, ever disputed the ability of its legendary

11. Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Draft FBI Strategic Plan: 1998–2003, Keeping Tomorrow Safe* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998), p. 40.

chairman and chief executive officer, Jack Welch, to make changes from the top. Second, no organizational solution is perfect. Too much centralization can stifle innovation, impede fast and nimble action, and dampen morale. Too much decentralization can hamper coordination, sow distrust, hinder information sharing, and create power centers that resist change. For intelligence reformers, the critical question is not whether to centralize, but what, how, and how much to centralize.

WHAT KIND OF FAILURE?

Rovner and Long's third criticism is that September 11 was a "national failure," not an intelligence failure. This argument is more radical than it sounds. According to Rovner and Long, the intelligence community adapted well to terrorism, providing good strategic and tactical warning before September 11. It is everyone else who failed. American citizens did not appreciate the gravity of the threat or demand bold action from elected officials. And elected officials never seriously considered what Rovner and Long see as the "only" policy choice that had a "realistic chance of disrupting or destroying al-Qaida"—a large, sustained conventional military effort abroad. Although the second part of their argument makes a reasonable claim, the first part does not. Consider what Rovner and Long believe to be their strongest case: that strategic warning about al-Qaida was both "available and accurate." Their evidence is the intelligence community's "broad appreciation of the growing danger of an al-Qaida attack" and the fact that the "general contours" of the terrorist threat were provided to policymakers. By that low standard, the premier U.S. intelligence agency should be ABC News, not the CIA. On June 10, 1998, the television network aired a feature on Osama bin Laden called "One of America's Most Dangerous Enemies."¹² The network clearly appreciated the danger of an al-Qaida attack and issued very public warnings about it, warnings that presumably reached the ears of policymakers given that one of them, National Security Adviser Samuel Berger, appeared on the show. Moreover, ABC's reporter managed to penetrate al-Qaida more effectively than the CIA's clandestine service, scoring an interview with bin Laden himself.

The 9/11 Commission and Joint Inquiry offer more comprehensive, and pessimistic, assessments of the intelligence community's strategic warning before September 11. The commission found that thousands of intelligence reports were written about al-Qaida in the years preceding the attacks, but not one addressed key issues such as bin Laden's strategy, his historical role in terrorist attacks, or the threat that al-Qaida posed to the United States.¹³ The Joint Inquiry found that the FBI devoted just one person to strategic analysis of al-Qaida.¹⁴ An internal Department of Justice review after September 11 found that the FBI produced only one strategic assessment of the terrorist threat, delivered in September 2001; it was considered too shoddy, however, to be of any use.¹⁵ Indeed, Rovner and Long have more confidence in the intelligence commu-

12. John McWethy, John Miller, and Ted Koppel, "One of America's Most Dangerous Enemies," *ABC Nightline*, June 10, 1998.

13. The 9/11 Commission, "The Performance of the Intelligence Community," Staff Statement No. 11, April 14, 2004, p. 4.

14. *Joint Inquiry Final Report*, pp. 266–267.

15. Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of Justice, "A Review of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Counterterrorism Program: Threat Assessment, Strategic Planning, and Resource

nity's strategic analysis capabilities than Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet did. In late 2000, Tenet was so alarmed by the poor quality of strategic analysis coming out of the Counterterrorism Center that he decided to create a new strategic assessments branch within it. Internal resistance was fierce, and progress was slow. The new chief of strategic assessments reported to work on September 10, 2001.

Rovner and Long admit that their evidence of tactical warning success is even thinner. I agree. They never mention the tactical warning failure of the PDB or other missed opportunities to gain specifics about the time, place, and manner of attack that have become well known to most Americans: the botched investigation of Zacarias Moussaoui, the so-called twentieth hijacker; and the FBI's failure to act on the Phoenix memo of July 10, 2001, warning that suspicious numbers of Islamist radicals were training in Arizona flight schools.¹⁶

Rovner and Long ask, "What more could the intelligence community have done?" The answer is much more. Senior officials inside the CIA and FBI saw the terrorist threat years before September 11 and tried desperately to transform their agencies to combat it. Tenet's efforts included attempts to rebuild the clandestine service, revamp analysis, and improve communitywide coordination. At the same time, FBI officials were racing to convert the bureau from a hidebound, reactive law-enforcement agency into a nimble, proactive domestic intelligence agency. They all failed. Understanding why is not an exercise in assigning blame, finding easy answers, or "reliev[ing] Americans' sense of national insecurity," as Rovner and Long suggest. It is the first step toward fixing what went wrong.

—Amy B. Zegart
Los Angeles, California

Management," Report No. 02-38, September 2002, executive summary, redacted and unclassified, <http://www.fas.org/irp/agency/doj/oig/fbi02sum.html>.

16. For more evidence, see my forthcoming book, *Intelligence in Wonderland: 9/11 and the Organizational Roots of Failure* (2007), which will include an examination of how organizational problems prevented the CIA and FBI from capitalizing on more than twenty opportunities to disrupt the September 11 plot.