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HEADLINE: CIA's problems lie not just with individuals

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Say it ain't so.

Four years after 9/11, the CIA has finally finished its highly classified review of what went wrong. Employing stunning powers of analysis, the agency has apparently concluded that its biggest problem was a handful of senior officials who used to work there: former Director George Tenet, former clandestine service chief Jim Pavitt, and former Counterterrorist Center head Cofer Black. I can hear the chants already: "Hold them accountable!"

I admit these guys are easy targets. Tenet slam-dunked his way to a presidential medal while presiding over the CIA's two worst intelligence failures since the agency was created in 1947: 9/11 and the mistaken weapons of mass destruction estimates that led to the Iraq war. While Pavitt was parsing White House orders about whether the agency could bring back Osama bin Laden's head on ice, Black's Counterterrorist Center was connecting the dots with junior analysts. Very junior.

The House and Senate intelligence committees found that, on average, Counterterrorist Center analysts had half the experience of analysts in the rest of the CIA. When the B-team is waging the war on terror, you're in trouble.

The sad fact, however, is that holding these men responsible for the CIA's failures is comforting but dangerous. Comforting because it makes us feel safer that there is someone to blame. Dangerous because it leads us to believe that, if only a few had done their jobs better, 9/11 could have been prevented. The reality is much worse. Yes, individuals made mistakes. But it was the system that failed us.

Case in point: Why did the CIA fail to watch-list Khalid Almihdhar and Nawaf Alhazmi, two of the 9/11 hijackers who first came to the attention of agency officials back in January 2000, when they attended what one intelligence official described as "the al-Qaida convention" in Malaysia?

The simplest answer is that keeping track of foreign terrorists had never been standard practice or a high priority. For more than 40 years the Cold War had dominated both the thinking and operation of the CIA and the other agencies. When the Cold War ended and the threat changed, these agencies were slow to change with it.

Before 9/11, there were no well-honed processes for identifying dangerous terrorists and warning other U.S. government agencies about them before they reached the United States. CIA officers let Almihdhar and Alhazmi into the country not because the officers failed at their

jobs, but because they never considered watch-listing to be their jobs.

These kinds of problems were everywhere in the CIA, built into the structure, fabric and culture of an agency that had spent its entire history facing down the same enemy.

When the al-Qaida convention disbanded in 2000, for example, the CIA tried to follow Almihdhar and Alhazmi but quickly lost their trail. The terrorists needed no clever tactics, fake names, secret codes or fancy driving. They simply boarded a commercial airplane that took them to Thailand, out of the jurisdiction of one CIA office and into the jurisdiction of another. The CIA's field office structure had long divided responsibilities by geography, concentrating on where, not who.

This structure made sense when the main threat was Soviet troop movements, but it made no sense for tracking transnational terrorists. Although many different CIA offices were watching the terrorist-tracking operation, nobody was overseeing it. This was not a mistake. It was standard practice.

Even worse, years after the Soviet Union's collapse, the CIA was still running spies according to a Cold War model: Nearly all of the agency's case officers were still stationed in U.S. embassies, where they posed as U.S. government officials and went to diplomatic cocktail parties. Good way to meet foreign government officials who might spy for the United States. Not so good for recruiting jihadists in caves.

And that's just the CIA. The other 13 intelligence agencies never believed George Tenet was their boss, and who can blame them? The secretary of defense controlled 80 percent of the intelligence budget for decades. Congressional intelligence committees tried to overhaul this dysfunctional structure twice in the 1990s, but their reform efforts were torpedoed by the Pentagon and pro-defense lawmakers in the armed services committees. Those interested in naming names should start by getting a Pentagon roster. For the past 50 years.

George Tenet and others made mistakes, but they are not solely to blame. Fingering a few CIA officials is easy. Fixing the CIA is not.