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“CNN with Secrets:” 9/11, the CIA, and the Organizational Roots of Failure

On 8 January 2000, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) lost track of three suspected al-Qaeda operatives traveling from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to Bangkok, Thailand. Several days earlier, intelligence officials had rushed to establish surveillance operations in Malaysia, believing—correctly—that “something nefarious might be afoot.”¹ The operation was deemed so important that regular updates were sent to Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) George J. Tenet, National Security Advisor Samuel Berger, and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Louis J. Freeh. Nobody, however, was prepared for what happened next: When the meeting disbanded, the trail went cold. The three operatives were tracked as far as a Bangkok-bound commercial flight, and although U.S. officials in both Kuala Lumpur and Washington sent urgent requests to Bangkok for help, by the time their messages arrived the terrorists had disappeared. Intelligence officials now know that two of the suspects, Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi, flew to the United States a few days later, where they settled in

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California and prepared for their 11 September 2001 suicide hijacking mission. The third, Khallad bin Attash, went on to plan the bombing of the USS *Cole* which killed 17 American sailors in the fall of 2000.²

EVERYTHING ASKEW

What went wrong? At first glance, the answer appears to be just about everything. In a technological age where teenagers have access to instant text messaging, three terrorists sitting on a plane for two hours reached Bangkok faster than the CIA's urgent communications. No one seemed to be thinking ahead or working together. Although CIA officials knew the full name of one of the men—Khalid al-Mihdhar—and that he held a U.S. visa, they apparently never considered the possibility that al-Mihdhar might actually use his visa to travel to the United States. CIA officials also never asked other intelligence agencies to check what they knew. A search of the National Security Agency's (NSA) database would have quickly revealed the full name of the second terrorist, Nawaf al-Hazmi. A search of the State Department's records would have uncovered that he, too, held a U.S. visa—which he presumably intended to use. Management of the operation was so disjointed that the head of the CIA's bin Laden unit believed, and told his bosses, that the suspects were still being monitored in Kuala Lumpur five days after they had already disappeared into the streets of Bangkok.³

Probing more deeply, however, reveals that the keystone cops picture described above—with seemingly incompetent individuals making one bad decision after another—is misleading. The real picture is worse. The Malaysia tracking failure was not an isolated mistake or the result of individual errors, but the product of three deeper and more intractable organizational deficiencies: (1) structural weaknesses dating back decades that prevented the Intelligence Community (IC) from working as a coherent whole; (2) perverse promotion incentives that rewarded intelligence officials for all of the wrong things; and (3) cultural pathologies that led intelligence agencies to resist new technologies, ideas, and tasks. These organizational deficiencies prevented the CIA from developing more opportunities to disrupt the plot, and limited the Agency's ability to capitalize on the few opportunities that it had.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL ROOTS OF FAILURE

Three types of organizational deficiencies have long plagued the CIA and other agencies of the U.S. Intelligence Community: deep structural divisions, cultural pathologies, and perverse incentives that encourage precisely the wrong behavior.

Structure

Organizational structure is more criticized than understood. Typically, structure is derided as the meaningless location of boxes on an organization chart, with reorganizations often compared to “rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.” But make no mistake: Organizational structure is not about boxes, it is about power. Structure divides jurisdictions and creates capabilities. It determines who performs which tasks by what authority and level of competence; who answers to whom; whose memo goes on top; and what formal powers organizational leaders have. Although good structure is not a cure-all, bad structure can have devastating effects on organizational performance.

The CIA’s structural problems can be described by one word: fragmentation. Internally, the CIA operated with a highly decentralized structure that gave field offices primacy and relegated headquarters units to supporting roles. With responsibility for covering a specific geographic region, each field office called its own shots and ran its own operations. This arrangement made some sense during the Cold War, when the enemy was clear and its mobility limited. The structure was poorly suited, however, for tracking terrorists who were difficult to identify and moved more freely across national borders and field office jurisdictions.⁴

At the same time, the CIA was also caught in a broader U.S. intelligence structure, described by one intelligence official as “too broke to be fixed.”⁵ In principle, the Central Intelligence Agency was supposed to integrate efforts across the thirteen other agencies in the U.S. Intelligence Community.⁶ In practice, however, the CIA’s director had almost no power over any of

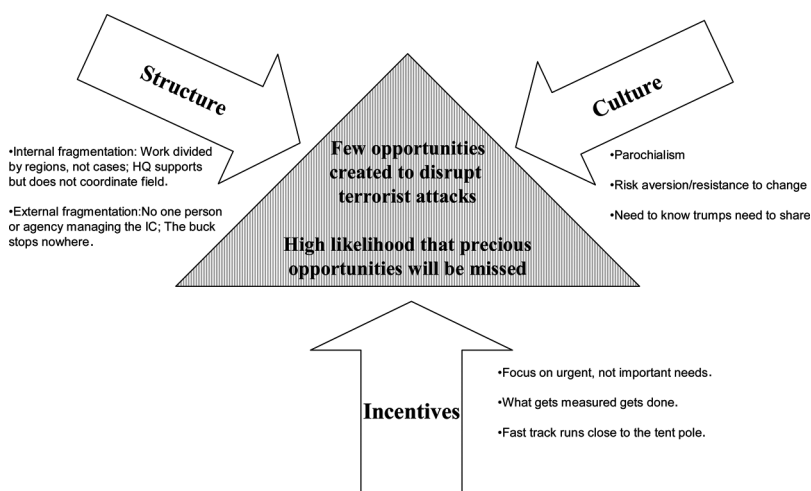


Figure 1. The CIA and 9/11: The Organizational Roots of Failure. (Amy B. Zegart)

them: he controlled only 15 percent of the intelligence budget, was prohibited from transferring funds between agencies without their approval, and had limited ability to hire and fire intelligence officials anywhere outside the CIA. The existence of so many separate agencies with separate domains and separate powers, and the absence of formal mechanisms to integrate them, was based in law and reinforced by bureaucratic procedures over time. Agencies developed their own budgets and set their own priorities. They hired their own staffs and trained them in separate programs. They communicated by separate e-mail systems and kept intelligence on incompatible databases. And because every agency had its own security badge, even officials with the highest level of security clearance could not walk through the turnstile of any intelligence office building except their own. In short, the Intelligence Community structure was all spokes and no hub.

Like the CIA's internal setup, this broader structural arrangement became more problematic once the Cold War ended. The Soviet Union was a monolithic, transparent, and relatively unchanging threat. As one veteran clandestine officer put it, "the Soviet Union was constrained by borders [and]... it was on a, God bless them, a five-year program. Everything was predictable."⁷ But transnational terrorism was a different story. Multifaceted, dynamic, hidden from view, the terrorist threat that emerged in the 1990s demanded an unprecedented degree of joint action across U.S. intelligence agencies—precisely the kind of integration the intelligence structure was incapable of providing. As one senior intelligence official lamented in March 2004,

If I could wave my magic wand and change the Intelligence Community, my primary interest would be to refocus the IC away from its old monolithic mission structure to a multi-mission structure.... To organize and coordinate us all to fight terrorism, you still need NGA, NSA, and CIA. But you need to pull them all together. That doesn't exist today. There's not the mechanism to pull them all together.⁸

In particular, the CIA and FBI for decades had been structured to operate in separate arenas, with the CIA collecting intelligence abroad, and the FBI assigned intelligence duties at home. This strict division was designed in 1947, in large part to protect American civil liberties, but it hindered precisely the kind of seamless transfer of information across borders and bureaucracies that counterterrorism efforts required. As President George H.W. Bush's National Security Adviser General Brent Scowcroft noted after the 11 September attacks: "The borders, as far as the terrorists are concerned, have gone. There is no distinction for terrorists between inside and outside the United States and I think that makes much more serious the division that we have between the CIA and the FBI."⁹

Culture

The second type of core organizational weakness involves culture—that is, the ideas, values, and beliefs that influence how employees view the world and what they hold dear. All organizations have cultures, some more engrained than others. When cultures correspond with organizational missions, they can serve as a powerful positive force, emphasizing “the way things are done around here.” But culture can also be pathological, fostering attitudes that can sap innovation and degrade agency performance over time.

The CIA faced a number of cultural pathologies. Chief among them were a debilitating sense of agency parochialism, resistance to change, and a belief in the overriding importance of security, captured by the phrase, “need to know.”

Structural divisions created a fertile environment for the growth of parochial agency attitudes. Hired, promoted, and cloistered inside separate agencies, performing classified work that could not be revealed even to their own families, intelligence officials naturally developed strong internal bonds of loyalty and identified themselves with their home agencies rather than the larger Intelligence Community as a whole. One Defense Intelligence official described the problem this way: “We don’t have much of a sense of loyalty to the community. We see ourselves as employees of agencies... [w]hen agencies get together... each agency tells their person, ‘we’re competitors... Make sure those bastards from CIA don’t run you over.’”¹⁰ Although such attitudes are not new, the risk they posed grew dramatically after the Cold War, when cross-cutting issues such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and counterterrorism demanded new levels of interagency collaboration.

Resistance to change also took hold during the Cold War. This should not be surprising: all organizations find it difficult to assume new tasks and behave in new ways as time passes. And the CIA had been confronting the same overarching threat for more than forty years.

Finally, Cold War security demands bred a deep belief in the importance of protecting information, sharing it only with those who demonstrated a compelling “need to know.” As one CIA official observed,

the hardest things to change are things that change fundamental underlying principles or beliefs about how to do your job differently... and the most deeply held principle [in intelligence] is the need to know. We believed in it for a long time. This principle is obviously now rubbing up against a new principle: the need to share. But what people believe and hold dear is very very hard to let go of, even in the fact of the need for change.¹¹

Incentives

The third type of core organizational deficiency has to do with incentives: which types of activities and attitudes are encouraged—by things like performance evaluations, promotion criteria, career awards—and which are not. In the CIA's case, these incentives often encouraged the wrong things. Performance evaluations for both CIA analysts and clandestine case officers emphasized activities that could be evaluated more easily and objectively—such as the number of spies recruited or the number of analytic reports compiled: quantity counted more than quality. CIA employees were not rewarded, or even evaluated, for working across agency lines. And in what one former National Intelligence Council official describes as the “tyranny of current intelligence,” CIA analysts and their managers after the Cold War were increasingly preoccupied with, and rewarded for, how well they dealt with immediate needs and news, not how well they performed on longer-term, strategic analysis of patterns and puzzles looming over the horizon.¹² Whereas the Soviet threat had bred and rewarded patience—it made sense to think of long-term analysis for a predictable and slowly changing long-term danger—the proliferation of post-Cold War threats and the rise of the 24-hour news cycle eroded the CIA's strategic analysis capabilities.¹³

THE MALAYSIA TRACKING FAILURE: A SECOND CUT

Viewing the Malaysia tracking failure through an organizational lens reveals a very different picture. This missed opportunity was not the result of random or isolated mistakes, but of pervasive and longstanding weaknesses in the CIA's structure, culture, and incentives.

Above all, surveillance of the three terrorists faltered because the CIA's internal structure left no single person or office in charge of the case. As the 9/11 Commission concluded, the CIA's field office structure focused on where, not who; it was designed to cover broad territory rather than track specific terrorists.¹⁴ The Kuala Lumpur field office ran surveillance while the terrorists stayed in Malaysia. Bangkok ran the operation once it realized the terrorists had arrived in Thailand. Nobody, however, was responsible for managing the transition between these two offices or picking up the trail once it had been lost. Back in Washington, the Directorate of Operations, which oversaw all clandestine activities; the Counterterrorist Center, which was supposed to integrate counterterrorism intelligence collection, analysis, and operations; and the CIA's Osama bin Laden unit were all watching the operation closely. But they were not overseeing it. This was not a mistake. It was standard practice. As one career clandestine officer put it, the structure was “as close to medieval architecture in management as you could find,” with personnel, resources, and power controlled by geographic barons managing the field divisions.¹⁵

Structural and cultural pathologies also explain why the CIA failed to get vital information about the terrorists from the National Security Agency and State Department even though it was designated the lead agency. Fragmentation across U.S. intelligence agencies meant that CIA officials had ready access only to information in their own databases. Getting the full picture required asking other agencies to join efforts. But this required thinking about the Intelligence Community as a unified team, something that was not natural for CIA officials. Instead, CIA officers approached this case like they had approached every other case for decades: with a deeply engrained parochial perspective—described by one government official as a “me, my, mine” view of the world—that naturally focused on the Agency’s own actions and information rather than integrating efforts across all agencies in the U.S. Intelligence Community.¹⁶ CIA officials neglected to ask the NSA and the State Department what they knew about the Kuala Lumpur terrorists—not because they fell down on the job, but because they never considered it to be their job.

Finally, incentives were also at work. After the 11 September 2001 attacks, CIA officials told Congressional investigators and the 9/11 Commission that they were overwhelmed by the daily press of business and had little time for important but longer-term projects, even those that sought to track the whereabouts of al-Qaeda operatives holding U.S. visas. In the words of the CIA’s Counterterrorist Center Director, Cofer Black, this operation was one among many and, because of its longer-term nature, was not considered “heavy water.”¹⁷ Without strong incentives to reward analysts for following cases over time and developing strategic intelligence, the urgent crowded out the important.

These organizational problems led the agency to fail again. Between January 2000 and 11 September 2001, the CIA had ten other known opportunities to penetrate and possibly thwart the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. It missed them all.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES 2, 3, AND 4: WATCHLISTING

At the same time the CIA lost Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi in Bangkok, it also failed to place al-Mihdhar on the State Department’s watch list denying him entry into the U.S. or to notify the FBI. The CIA missed another watch list opportunity in March 2000, when it finally identified Nawaf al-Hazmi by his full name and learned that he had already entered the United States. Failure struck again in January 2001, when the CIA learned that a third Kuala Lumpur operative, Khallad, was the key figure in the bombing of the USS *Cole*. This new piece of information was viewed as highly significant, since it directly and definitively linked both al-Mihdhar and al-Hazmi to a significant al-Qaeda

figure.¹⁸ Khallad, in fact, was later described by one FBI counterterrorism official as “a major league killer.”¹⁹ Yet, for the third time in a year, nobody at the CIA notified the FBI or State Department to keep al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar out of the U.S. or find them if they were already there.

Although determining what might have been is impossible, intelligence officials now know that, in January 2001, al-Mihdhar was temporarily outside the United States; watchlisting him could have resulted in denying him a U.S. visa.²⁰ It is also possible that this information would have prompted the FBI to locate and watch al-Hazmi, who was still inside the United States. The two terrorists should not have been all that difficult to find: both of them had numerous contacts with an FBI informant while living in San Diego in 2000;²¹ al-Hazmi was listed in the San Diego telephone directory;²² al-Mihdhar used his real name to obtain a California photo identification card;²³ both used their real names on a rental agreement; and al-Mihdhar’s correct address was found by the FBI’s information technology center, using nothing but his name and open sources, in just a few hours the night of 11 September.²⁴

Nawaf al-Hazmi, moreover, was not just any hijacker: he is believed to have been second-in-command of the entire operation.²⁵ Intelligence officials now know that al-Hazmi made personal contact with individuals from at least three of the four hijacking teams between May and July of 2001, perhaps earlier.²⁶ Al-Hazmi, in other words, was a key link among multiple elements of the plot.

These retrospective facts suggest that had the FBI been properly notified at any of the three watchlisting opportunities, a very real possibility might have developed that the Bureau would have chosen to investigate these two men; that one or both would have been found; and that surveillance would have led the FBI to all but one of the hijacking teams weeks, if not months, before the attacks occurred. Indeed, according to the FBI agent who handled the informant who knew the two hijackers, the CIA’s information about al-Mihdhar and al-Hazmi “would have made a huge difference.” Testifying before the Congressional Joint Inquiry into 11 September, the FBI agent reflected:

We had the predicate for a [deleted] investigation if we had that information [W]e would immediately go out and canvas the sources and try to find out where these people were [T]hey were very close—they were nearby—[and] We would have used all available investigative techniques. We would have given them the full court press.²⁷

The agent’s views are speculative and made in hindsight. But, as the Joint Inquiry more soberly concluded, “The informant’s contacts with the

hijackers, had they been capitalized on, would have given the San Diego FBI field office perhaps the Intelligence Community's best chance to unravel the September 11 plot."²⁸ Instead, information about al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar was not passed to FBI officials until 23 August 2001, just nineteen days before they hijacked American Airlines Flight 77 and crashed it into the Pentagon.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES 5, 6, 7, AND 8: INFORMATION SHARING

The CIA missed four more operational opportunities when officials failed to share what turned out to be key pieces of information with their counterparts at the FBI.²⁹ In January 2000, a CIA employee spoke to two FBI employees about the activities of Khalid al-Mihdhar in Malaysia, but did not tell them about al-Mihdhar's U.S. visa.³⁰ In May 2001, a CIA official detailed to the FBI's International Terrorism Operations Section became concerned about the spike in threat reporting, indicating an imminent terrorist attack. Searching through old CIA cables, he learned of al-Mihdhar's U.S. visa, al-Hazmi's travel to the United States, and Khallad's attendance at the Malaysia meeting. The CIA official concluded that "something bad was definitely up."³¹ Yet, he never shared any of this information with his colleagues at the FBI or asked them to determine whether any of these terrorists were in the United States.³²

That same month, another CIA official had the chance to disclose information about the plot to an FBI counterpart, but did not. The CIA official, an analyst who was trying to identify someone else in U.S. custody in connection with the USS *Cole* bombing, showed an FBI Intelligence Operations Specialist a picture of al-Mihdhar—but said nothing about the fact that the picture had been taken at a meeting with Khallad, that al-Mihdhar held a U.S. visa, or that he might travel to the United States.³³

On 11 June, the same CIA analyst met with FBI agents from the New York field office who were investigating the *Cole* case. The New York agents were also shown copies of al-Mihdhar's photo. But they were told only his name. One of the New York agents pressed for more information, asking, "Why were you looking at this guy? You couldn't have been following everybody.... What was the reason behind this?"³⁴ He didn't get an answer. The CIA analyst said that the information could not be passed, but might be shared in the days and weeks to come. Despite repeated inquiries by the FBI agent, it was not.³⁵

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES 9, 10, AND 11: ANALYSIS

Finally, the CIA missed three opportunities to piece together new and old information that might have led to discovery of the plot. On 12 June 2001,

the CIA disseminated a report to all Intelligence Community agencies reporting that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM), who was already under indictment for his role in the 1995 Bojinka terrorist plot (which included plans to crash airplanes into the CIA headquarters), was one of bin Laden's most trusted lieutenants, and was actively recruiting operatives to travel outside Afghanistan, including to the United States, to plan terrorist-related activities.³⁶ But because KSM had been indicted, responsibility for his case rested in the Renditions Branch of the CIA's Counterterrorist Center. That office focused on locating him for arrest, not for analyzing information about him in the context of other possible terrorist plots. As a result, the report accurately identified KSM's role—he did, in fact, arrange travel of the hijackers to the United States and was the mastermind of the 11 September plot—but the report never connected him to other information inside the CIA about Khalid al-Mihdhar's visa or Nawaf al-Hazmi's arrival in the United States.³⁷

The most controversial and widely known incident occurred on 6 August, when the CIA delivered a briefing to President George W. Bush titled, "Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in U.S."³⁸ The report was part of the *President's Daily Brief (PDB)*, the most highly classified and important current intelligence product in the U.S. government, and was prompted by the President's questions about the possibility of a domestic al-Qaeda attack. This was a golden opportunity for the CIA to distill the best intelligence from across the U.S. Intelligence Community and present it directly to the President.

To some, the *PDB*, which was disclosed in a set of explosive 9/11 Commission hearings on national television in the spring of 2004, appeared to provide a smoking gun, proof that the Bush Administration had been warned about al-Qaeda's intention to strike inside the U.S. but failed to take that warning seriously enough. A closer examination of the declassified document, however, suggests something quite different: the 6 August *PDB* was a tragically shoddy piece of intelligence analysis that provided unimportant information, false reassurances, wrong information, and failed to include the best intelligence available about al-Qaeda operatives in the United States—information that might have made a difference.

For starters, the *PDB* consisted mostly of historical information about bin Laden's interest in striking the United States—information the President later said he already knew.³⁹ A word count reveals that 82 percent of the document (the entire first page) discusses reporting about al-Qaeda and other terrorist activities between 1993 and 1999, while just 18 percent of the document (two paragraphs on the second page) addresses intelligence about current bin Laden activities.⁴⁰

The *PDB* also provided false assurances that the FBI was aggressively investigating terrorist threats directed at the United States homeland.

Although the memo warned that “Al-Qa’ida members—including some who are US citizens—have resided in or traveled to the US for years, and the group apparently maintains a support structure that could aid attacks,” it gave the distinct impression that the FBI had the domestic threat covered. The memo’s concluding paragraph noted: “The FBI is conducting approximately 70 full field investigations throughout the US that it considers bin Laden-related.”⁴¹ President Bush later told the 9/11 Commission that he remembered thinking it was heartening that 70 investigations were underway.⁴² His National Security Adviser, Dr. Condoleezza Rice, also testified that the report suggested the FBI was handling the threat posed by potential domestic sleeper cells. She told the Commission, “I...understood that...the FBI was pursuing these al Qaeda cells.... In the August 6th memorandum it says that there were 70 full field investigations underway of these cells. And so there was no recommendation that we do something about this...the FBI was pursuing it.”⁴³ But, in fact, the FBI was not pursuing sleeper cells aggressively. Officials later admitted to the 9/11 Commission that the number of full field investigations had been exaggerated (counting individuals under investigation rather than separate investigations and considering all terrorist financing cases as “bin Ladin-related”). And at the very moment the *PDB* was being delivered to the President, an FBI memo by a Phoenix special agent recommending more aggressive action to investigate whether bin Laden operatives were enrolling in U.S. flight schools was gathering dust at FBI headquarters.

Two of the three other pieces of current intelligence in the *PDB* also turned out to be wrong.⁴⁴ The memo noted uncorroborated “sensational reporting” from foreign intelligence services that bin Laden wanted to hijack a U.S. aircraft to gain the release of extremists held in the United States; there was no mention of the possibility of using airplanes as missiles. The *PDB* also reported that FBI information indicated “patterns of suspicious activity” in the U.S. “consistent with preparations for hijackings or other types of attacks, including recent surveillance of federal buildings in New York.” Although this statement sounds ominous in retrospect, the casing of New York targets turned out to be a coincidence, not a forewarning: The memo’s reference to “surveillance of federal buildings in New York” turned out to be Yemeni tourists taking photographs.⁴⁵

These sins of commission were accompanied by even more alarming sins of omission. The *PDB* never mentioned key pieces of information that various individuals in the Intelligence Community already believed to be important: namely, that Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi had attended an al-Qaeda meeting in Malaysia with a major bin Laden figure; that al-Mihdhar held a U.S. visa; and that al-Hazmi had already traveled to the United States; that KSM, one of bin Laden’s most trusted operatives, was

recruiting terrorists to travel to, and plan terrorist activities in, the United States; that dramatic spikes in intelligence chatter suggested an imminent catastrophic terrorist attack against American targets somewhere in the world; and that a star FBI agent believed that bin Laden might be sending operatives to the U.S. for flight training.

The last missed opportunity occurred in late August, when both DCI Tenet and his deputy, John McLaughlin, were informed that the FBI had arrested a man named Zacarias Moussaoui, and that the CIA and FBI were working on the case.⁴⁶ Moussaoui, an Islamic extremist who had aroused suspicion at a Minneapolis flight school, is now believed to have been the “20th hijacker,” has pleaded guilty to six counts of conspiracy in the 11 September attacks, and is serving a lifetime, solitary prison sentence without parole. But, back in August 2001, no one connected Moussaoui to other information about al-Mihdhar’s visa, al-Hazmi’s travels, their connections to bin Laden, reports about KSM, or the alarming levels of threat reporting. DCI Tenet told the 9/11 Commission that, by late July, “the system was blinking red” and that it could not “get any worse,” but the system was unable to make sense of the pieces of information it had.⁴⁷

THE ORGANIZATIONAL ROOTS OF FAILURE

The CIA’s inability to capitalize on all these opportunities stemmed from the same organizational causes. First, structural fragmentation raised exceptionally high barriers for any activity requiring collaboration across agency lines, and counterterrorism efforts—placing suspected al-Qaeda operatives on watch lists, sharing information between the CIA and FBI, and drafting intelligence assessments for the President—required precisely this kind of collaboration. In a system hardwired to keep agencies apart, talented officials could do only so much to make them work together. Even in 2001, despite Director Tenet’s strategic plan calling for greater unity of effort across agencies, the Intelligence Community lacked basic managerial tools such as a community-wide financial accounting system and a computer architecture that could integrate counterterrorism data across all the different agencies.⁴⁸ Lines between the CIA and FBI were so hardened that temporary assignments between the two agencies were known as the “hostage exchange program,” and standard operating procedures excluded the Attorney General from receiving the *President’s Daily Brief*.⁴⁹

Structural fragmentation also made it likely that trails would go cold, information would not be shared, and dots would not get connected because everyone assumed that the responsibility for specific tasks rested, at least in part, someplace else: Washington officials looked to the field to find the whereabouts of al-Mihdhar, al-Hazmi, and Khallad; lower-level

CIA employees believed authority for sharing information resided with their superiors, when it did not; the CIA's Renditions Unit focused only on finding KSM, and assumed others in the CIA would analyze any intelligence leads his case produced. Even the Director of Central Intelligence said he took no action after receiving his briefing about the FBI's arrest of Zacarias Moussaoui in Minneapolis—a briefing titled, “Islamic Extremist Learns to Fly”—because he viewed it as an FBI case.⁵⁰ Indeed, DCI Tenet called the structural divide between the CIA and FBI the most serious weakness in U.S. counterterrorism capabilities before 11 September, telling the 9/11 Commission, “most profoundly, we lacked a government-wide capability to integrate foreign and domestic knowledge, data, operations, and analysis. Warning is not good enough without the structure to put it into action.”⁵¹ The Commission agreed, finding that “the terrorists exploited deep institutional failings within our government.”⁵²

Organizational culture also had debilitating effects on the CIA's counterterrorism efforts. Different CIA officials on more than one occasion neglected to watchlist two of the 11 September hijackers, share information, and distill vital pieces of intelligence scattered throughout the community, in large part because they were steeped in an organizational culture that regarded these activities as unnatural acts: embracing new tasks, thinking beyond the agency, and sharing secrets all ran against the grain of everything CIA officers had known, believed, and cherished for years. Cold War habits (which never gave high priority to placing suspected terrorists on watchlists), parochial agency perspectives, and cherished values about the vital importance of protecting information rather than sharing it had a powerful grip.

Finally, career incentives exacerbated structural and cultural deficiencies. Clinton Administration Attorney General Janet Reno made no bones about the fact that employees were not rewarded for interagency work. “At the FBI in particular, agents are not trained to share information with other agencies,” Reno told the 9/11 Commission. “Nor are they evaluated and rewarded based on their ability to generate and share information that other agencies might find useful This must change.”⁵³ In fact, DCI Tenet had tried years earlier to change the incentive structure to foster greater cross-agency collaboration, requiring rotational assignments to other intelligence agencies for promotion. The program did not succeed because no agency wanted to send its best people away, and because rising stars knew that leaving their home agency meant getting off the fast track to career success. As one senior intelligence official noted, “Managers are only in the job three years. They want their good people to stay. They can't send them off for one or two years . . . [because] they are very concerned about what happens on their watch.”⁵⁴ Agencies were still struggling with this issue years after 11 September. As one senior

intelligence official noted in 2004, “We need to create the incentive structure to evaluate people’s performance in collaboration and teamwork. The leadership structures need to make clear that it’s not just expected, it’s demanded. We are not there yet”⁵⁵

In addition to discouraging desired behavior, career incentives often allowed undesired behavior to go unpunished, particularly when it came to sharing information. As one senior intelligence official noted, “No one’s career is ever ruined by being too restrictive about classified information.”⁵⁶

Incentives impeded analysis as well. One reason why CIA officials did such a poor job synthesizing counterterrorism information before 11 September is that they operated in a system that prized output and immediacy more than quality and importance. As one intelligence official noted, “We’ve become a fully mature public bureaucracy. Your career as an analyst is determined by how many products you produce. It’s about how many items you have in the *PDB*, more than whether what you said was particularly smart.”⁵⁷ Evidence suggests that these incentives did, in fact, create system-wide knowledge gaps about key counterterrorism issues. Between 1998 and 2001, the CIA produced hundreds of analyses about Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda in the *President’s Daily Brief* and other reports,⁵⁸ with 40 different *PDB* reports in 2001 alone.⁵⁹ Not one of them provided a broad overview of al-Qaeda’s involvement in past terrorist activities, a comprehensive view of al-Qaeda’s strategy, or its relationships with other governments. And none assessed the nature or scale of the threat that bin Laden’s terrorist network posed to the United States.⁶⁰ CIA assessments pointed out the trees but never provided a picture of the forest.

In sum, the Cold War’s end left the CIA with a structure splintered into disparate units and no fusion between them; with an organizational culture that viewed intelligence from a parochial perspective, resisted new tasks, and valued keeping secrets above all else; and with career incentives that discouraged interagency collaboration and analysis of big picture issues. These deficiencies struck at the core of how CIA officials perceived and performed their jobs, making it likely that terrorist trails would get lost and information would fall between the cracks.

RED FLAGS IN A SEA OF RED FLAGS?

Critics will argue that this account of missed opportunities is unfair: It has often been said that U.S. intelligence agencies must be right 100 percent of the time, while terrorists need to succeed only once. Many have also suggested, quite correctly, that sifting through massive volumes of intelligence for clues to a surprise attack is an inherently daunting challenge. Roberta Wohlstetter’s classic study of the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor found that, in 1941, various U.S. intelligence agencies had

pieces of information about the impending attack, but nobody could distinguish these warnings from all of the background noise.⁶¹ As Bruce Berkowitz writes, “This problem of signal-to-noise ratio is so fundamental in the intelligence business that today, if one refers to the ‘Roberta Wohlstetter problem,’ almost everyone knows exactly what you are talking about.”⁶² Sixty years later, these challenges may be even worse. When Wohlstetter wrote her book in 1962, there were 5,000 computers in the world, no fax machines or cellular phones. Today, the National Security Agency, which collects signals intelligence, must contend with 180 million computers, 14 million fax machines, and 40 million cell phones.⁶³ The NSA’s information intake is astounding: it operates a dozen or more listening posts around the world, each of which intercepts two million faxes, e-mails, telephone calls, and other signals every hour.⁶⁴ That’s about 200 million pieces of intelligence in a regular workday; little wonder less than one percent of it is ever decoded, translated, or processed.⁶⁵ Dale Watson, the FBI’s former counterterrorism chief, described the challenges of preventing the 11 September attacks in this way:

There were a lot of red flags prior to 9/11. And once 9/11 occurred it’s real easy to go back and pick out the red flag in the ocean of red flags and say “You should have done this” or “You should have seen this.” And the threat to aviation is certainly one of the areas that we received threat reporting on. It was not the only area. We had threats to malls, threats to power plants, threats to assassinations. Across the board we have threats coming in every day. And if something happened today concerning a small boat attacking somewhere in one of our harbors in the U.S., we’d probably have information about that. So it’s a mass of information and it’s a sea of threats, and it’s like working against a maze. If you know where the end point of a maze is, it’s certainly easier to work your way back to the starting point than trying to go through the maze and sort out all the red flags.”⁶⁶

Unsustainable Alibis

These criticisms are understandable, but ultimately unconvincing, for three reasons. First, every one of the eleven missed opportunities involved information that the CIA and other officials had already distinguished from the background noise. Remember that back in January of 2000, CIA leaders were so convinced about the potential significance of the al-Qaeda meeting in Malaysia, they not only set up surveillance of it, but provided regular updates to the FBI Director, the head of the CIA, and the National Security Advisor. CIA officials knew this al-Qaeda meeting was important. They treated it as important. They were primed by reports of potential terrorist attacks surrounding the millennium. They were tipped off to the meeting by sources considered to be the very best

on al-Qaeda.⁶⁷ They believed “something nefarious” was afoot. And nothing they learned suggested otherwise. A year and half before the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, Khalid al-Mihdhar, Nawaf al-Hazmi, and Khallad bin Attash were singled out. The Wohlstetter problem had been overcome. Only then did the system break down. The 9/11 Commission staff investigating the Malaysian tracking and watchlisting failures concluded: “We believe every available resource should have been devoted to learning who these people were, and trying to spot and track them.”⁶⁸ This never happened. The signal was not missed. It was found and then lost.

Second, CIA officials were not searching for red flags in an endless sea of possible threats. They were focused on terrorism and al-Qaeda. In the spring and summer of 2001, the U.S. intelligence system was, in DCI Tenet’s words, “blinking red,” with an unprecedented crescendo of reports suggesting an imminent and catastrophic terrorist attack against American targets somewhere in the world. In June, and again in July, intelligence agencies warned senior U.S. government officials that attacks were expected to “cause major casualties” and would “occur with little or no warning.”⁶⁹ Many intelligence officials told the 9/11 Commission that they realized something terrible was in the offing and were working desperately to stop it.⁷⁰ American embassies were warned of the possibility of attack. Military exercises were cancelled and alert levels raised. All 56 FBI offices in the United States were called and told to make preparations. The President was briefed repeatedly about al-Qaeda’s intention to strike American targets.⁷¹ To be sure, most of the threat reporting pointed overseas. But the 11 September attacks were not bolts from the blue. U.S. intelligence officials and senior policymakers knew an attack was coming, and that al-Qaeda was behind it. This information alone narrowed the scope of inquiry considerably. Nobody stayed awake nights considering the terrorist implications of North Korean troop movements or worrying about whether Chinese officials (or any other foreign government officials, for that matter) were secretly casing U.S. targets. The intelligence challenge was still formidable, but certainly not impossible. CIA officials still had to find the red flags, but with one major advantage: they had a pretty good idea what they were looking for.

Yet the CIA failed to use this advantage to focus its own intelligence collection and analysis efforts in a systematic way. Nor did the Agency ever develop a comprehensive collection and analysis plan for the rest of the Intelligence Community. What al-Qaeda information did U.S. intelligence agencies already possess? What questions still needed to be answered, and in what priority? What kinds of intelligence could fill in the gaps? Which agencies and people were best suited for the job, and how could they work together most productively? These questions were never

asked, let alone answered.⁷² Instead, smart intelligence professionals were cast adrift, left to piece together what they knew, based on what they could get. Tellingly, even the eventual watchlisting of al-Mihdhar and al-Hazmi nineteen days before the attacks was not part of any formal assignment, but came from two FBI analysts and a CIA analyst who reviewed the information on their own.

Third, although no organizational arrangement guarantees 100 percent success, in this case the CIA's organizational weaknesses led to 100 percent failure. The Agency did not miss some of the eleven opportunities it had to potentially disrupt the 11 September attacks. It missed them all. A track record that poor suggests that something more fundamental is broken.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES THE CIA NEVER GOT

Organizational problems also hurt the CIA's chances of preventing the 11 September attacks in a more fundamental and less obvious way: by crippling the Agency's ability to generate more disruption opportunities than it had. Deficiencies in the CIA's structure, culture, and incentive system did not just impair the Agency's ability to make the most of opportunities that arose in the final stages of the 11 September plot. These organizational problems also weakened long-term human intelligence collection efforts and strategic analysis capabilities that were crucial for collecting the dots and connecting them early on, before the hijackers ever reached the United States.

Collecting Dots

According to many current and senior officials, more serious than the Intelligence Community's failure to connect the dots in the run-up to 11 September was the absence of useful dots to connect. Despite tremendous effort over several years, the CIA was unable to develop a single human source inside al-Qaeda's leadership before 11 September, and never got inside the operational plans of the attacks.⁷³ As a result, U.S. intelligence agencies were left to guess around the edges of the plot, picking up clues where they could. In a highly usual public article titled, "America Needs More Spies," six former intelligence officials—including Robert Bryant, Deputy Director of the FBI, and John MacGaffin, who served as a senior official in the CIA's clandestine branch, the Directorate of Operations (DO)—singled out human intelligence weaknesses as the most important shortcoming in the U.S. Intelligence Community. "Despite the best efforts of our law-enforcement and intelligence agencies," they wrote, "the fact remains that secret members of a conspiratorial foreign organization operated clandestinely abroad and in this country for almost a decade before September 11th to plan, lay the groundwork for and successfully

carry out a surprise attack on the United States We simply did not have enough actionable information from spies inside al-Qaeda.”⁷⁴ They went on to issue a strong call for better and more human intelligence. “Our collective experience makes it absolutely clear that the *only* way to uncover and destroy terrorist activity is to *penetrate the organizations engaged in it*. And the best way to do this is to place spies in their innermost councils [emphasis theirs].”⁷⁵

Before 11 September the CIA’s human intelligence efforts were doubly hamstrung—first, by the inherent challenges of penetrating terrorist groups, and second by the Agency’s own weaknesses.

Infiltrating a terrorist cell is no easy task. As one senior intelligence official put it, “It’s just so hard to do, getting at the people we need to get at. It was different when we were going after foreign governments. Terrorist groups are a totally different target.” He continued:

I’ll never forget a video I saw at the CIA that was an al-Qaeda training video. The first pictures were of young Muslim men talking, taking an oath of allegiance, talking about fighting Jihad. The next pictures were the same people lying dead. And this was a recruiting video. And I thought, “How in the world do we put people in there?” Not only are we asking them to do horrible things, but we may be asking them to martyr themselves. That’s not to say we shouldn’t be trying.⁷⁶

A former operative described the problem more colorfully: “It’s hard and dangerous work, and it’s done in places where diarrhea is the default setting.”⁷⁷ Even the House and Senate Intelligence Committees’ Joint Inquiry into the 11 September attacks, which spared no criticism of U.S. intelligence agencies, noted that terrorist groups posed far greater challenges than other targets. “The penetration of al-Qa’ida by an Intelligence Community human asset is an exceptionally difficult task,” the Committees’ final report concluded. “Intelligence Community officials in several agencies told the Joint Inquiry that members of Usama Bin Ladin’s inner circle have close bonds established by kinship, wartime experience, and long-term association. Information about major terrorist plots was not widely shared within al-Qa’ida.”⁷⁸

Although penetrating bin Laden’s inner circle was exceptionally difficult, the CIA was actually in no shape to succeed. The same organizational problems that prevented the Agency from disrupting the 11 September attacks in the end also kept it from developing good human intelligence sources inside al-Qaeda from the beginning.

First, structural fragmentation created a system that invested far more in technical intelligence collection systems than human sources. Because control over most of the intelligence budget effectively rested in the hands of the Secretary of Defense rather than the Director of Central Intelligence,

funding priorities naturally gravitated toward expensive hardware—satellites, listening stations, signals intelligence aircraft, and other technologies—that were operated by the Pentagon, highly valued for military missions, and benefited defense contractors.⁷⁹ To be sure, developing sophisticated technical collection platforms and launch vehicles required much greater absolute levels of investment than building human spy networks. As one clandestine official admitted, “You cannot spend a gajillion dollars on spying. It just doesn’t need as much as satellite systems.”⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the official noted, technical intelligence systems received a disproportionate share of total intelligence spending, and this disparity both reflected and fueled an overconfidence in the utility of technology. “It wasn’t so much the imbalance of money, although that was significant,” he said. “It was the imbalance of the belief that technical sources would save the day.”⁸¹ Taking satellite pictures and intercepting signals might have worked well against the Soviet Union, but gathering information about terrorist groups required getting people inside them.

Yet, when the principal threat to U.S. national security shifted, the Intelligence Community’s structure did not. Structural fragmentation ensured that intelligence budgets continued pouring money into technical intelligence systems designed to fight the Soviet Union rather than human intelligence networks required for penetrating al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. Although details about U.S. intelligence spending are classified, pieces of evidence suggest that between 1991 and 2001, more than 90 percent of the U.S. intelligence budget continued to be spent on hardware rather than on recruiting spies. The House Intelligence Committee noted in its unclassified Authorization Act Report for Fiscal Year 1998 that clandestine human intelligence constituted “a single digit percentage” of the National Foreign Intelligence Program⁸² budget, and had declined in real dollar terms in the mid-1990s.⁸³ Conservative estimates based on the declassified 1997 intelligence budget total of \$26.6 billion⁸⁴ put overall human intelligence spending at \$1.6 billion, a little more than the cost of building and launching a single spy satellite.⁸⁵ One government official with access to the CIA’s Directorate of Operations (DO) budget in the 1990s calculated that less than two percent of total intelligence spending went to paying for CIA human intelligence operations in the field.⁸⁶ Shortly after the 11 September attacks, the *New York Times* reported that the United States spent more than \$10 billion a year on spy satellites and other hardware, but just over \$10 million for all CIA covert operations in East Asia.⁸⁷ As one former senior intelligence official reflected, after the Cold War “money was in short supply” for all intelligence needs, and the Clandestine Service was “in total disarray.”⁸⁸

Second, the CIA’s cultural resistance to change froze clandestine human intelligence operations in an outdated Cold War model. Originally, the DO

was created as a bureaucracy to collect against other bureaucracies, snatching secrets about and from foreign governments. For decades, almost all undercover CIA operatives worked under official covers, posing as U.S. government employees, working at American embassies around the world, and attending diplomatic events and parties where they would recruit foreign military officials, political party members, and other bureaucrats to spy for the United States. One veteran clandestine case officer described the usefulness of the model this way: “The guy in the embassy was appropriate for the last 50 years because the secrets you wanted resided in a defense minister’s safe or a prime minister’s office. They were in governments . . . [G]oing to the cocktail party or the training conference with government officials from other countries made sense.”⁸⁹ In this system, cultural and regional expertise was considered helpful but not necessary. At the CIA’s espionage training school at Camp Peary, Virginia, newly hired case officers were taught how to use shortwave radios and detect car bombs, but not how to understand and work effectively in foreign cultures.⁹⁰ In fact, instructors often told trainees that cultural distinctions did not matter, that an operation was the same, regardless of where it took place or what it was targeting—an attitude captured by the saying, “an op is an op.”⁹¹ And once case officers left training, they were reassigned to new countries about every three years.⁹²

The Cold War’s end required radically different approaches. These included much greater use of nonofficial covers (NOCS, pronounced “knocks”): clandestine case officers who worked under affiliations—such as businessmen or members of anti-American organizations—that were unconnected to the U.S. government, traveled quietly into and out of foreign countries, and sought to penetrate small nongovernment groups such as terrorist cells or nuclear weapons traffickers rather than large foreign government agencies. But these new approaches never took hold.⁹³ Instead, the attitude in the Directorate of Operations was, in the words of one former clandestine officer, “we’ve been doing this for 20 years.” While a few pushed for greater use of NOCs and a more vigorous effort to fundamentally rethink the craft of human intelligence, they became marginalized while the rest of the DO “just kept driving down that set of tracks, working through diplomatic receptions, and areas that we knew there were no terrorists.”⁹⁴ According to several former DO officials, the number of NOCs from 1990 to 2001 remained flat. As another lamented, “We were resistant to change. We had a comfort zone and we were going to stay right there.”⁹⁵

Finally, career incentives discouraged case officers inside the CIA’s Directorate of Operations from developing country expertise, focusing on long-term intelligence collection needs, and adapting to new ways to thinking and operating. The directorate’s policies required frequent

rotations to different countries and rewarded generalists, not specialists, with promotions and assignments. In addition, personnel policies also made it difficult for case officers to develop deeper country or linguistic expertise by attending graduate degree programs in the United States. As veteran Middle East operative Robert Baer put it, “No one in the DO ever goes to graduate school. We don’t want people to have advanced degrees.”⁹⁶ When Baer himself tried to enroll in a nighttime Master’s program in Middle Eastern studies, the CIA resisted, refusing to pay for the entire program and requiring separate approval for every course instead.⁹⁷

Incentives also led the DO to focus more on immediate needs than on longer-term collection. One former DO official recalled that in the early 1990s, he initiated a review to determine human intelligence needs over the next decade. But when he asked the national security adviser and other members of the NSC staff what human intelligence they needed in the future, he “quickly discovered that almost universally the answer was, ‘I don’t know, but King Hussein is going to visit tomorrow. Can you tell me what he’s going to ask me?’”⁹⁸ Policymaker demands kept strategic collection on the back burner. Another former clandestine officer joked that responding to current intelligence demands had become such a way of life that our strategic thinking for the head of the DO consisted of “studying the time, date and place for the next meeting.”⁹⁹

Finally, DO personnel policies were designed to retain poor performers and those who were either unable or unwilling to adapt to new challenges rather than weeding them out or helping them improve their performance. One clandestine official described the performance evaluation system with notable frustration:

Look at the way we discipline people when somebody screws up. We informally refer to it as “putting somebody in the box.” Alright. And we put them in the penalty box for one to two years, no promotions, no bonuses, no key assignments. What we don’t do is we don’t look at that mistake and try to address that mistake and give them extra training or assistance to improve or to repair what was wrong with that person. So we put them in the penalty box. The person that penalized them, sooner or later moves on or retires or dies, and so then all is forgotten and forgiven, and the person back there with the same flaws is back in line.”¹⁰⁰

Another clandestine service officer noted: “You know, normally if you have a marginal performer, not a total failure but a marginal performer, . . . you may even inflate his performance evaluation grades” in order to move him into another assignment.¹⁰¹

In sum, as the threat shifted, the CIA’s Directorate of Operations did not. Underfunded, stuck in a Cold War model designed to recruit third party

secretaries at diplomatic functions rather than Islamist warriors at Afghan training camps, and riddled by personnel policies that discouraged long-term thinking or deep expertise and let mediocrity go unchecked, the Directorate of Operations had little chance of collecting useful dots.

Connecting Dots: Strategic Analysis

The CIA's primary mission has always been to provide integrated strategic analysis and warning for the U.S. Intelligence Community. As the 9/11 Commission noted, strategic analysis "is more than a news report." Whereas tactical analysis examines a specific operation in a specific situation, strategic analysis seeks to provide a 50,000-foot view of future threats, looking "beyond the particular to see patterns, notice gaps, or assemble a larger picture on a wider timeframe."¹⁰² Done well, strategic analysis focuses intelligence collection efforts productively and enables policymakers to identify threats and develop policies to address them before crises erupt or disaster strikes.

In retrospect, the CIA's strategic analysis about Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network before 11 September missed key issues that should have been covered, and identified important patterns only to overlook them later. Thousands of intelligence reports were written about al-Qaeda in the years preceding the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks.¹⁰³ But none of them provided a broad picture of such critical issues as bin Laden's strategy, his historical role in terrorist attacks, or the threat that al-Qaeda posed to the United States.¹⁰⁴ What's more, the most impressive piece of strategic analysis, distributed in the summer of 1995, attracted little notice over the next six years. The piece was a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) called "The Foreign Terrorist Threat in the United States."

National Intelligence Estimates are not just any intelligence reports. They are considered the gold standard of community-wide intelligence assessments, produced by the Director of Central Intelligence's own think tank, the National Intelligence Council.¹⁰⁵ The 1995 National Intelligence Estimate specifically predicted future terrorist attacks against targets in the United States. It warned that such attacks would be carried out by groups of "transient" individuals with "loose affiliations" similar to the group that carried out the 1993 World Trade Center attack. It also warned that potential targets included the White House, the Capitol, economic symbols such as Wall Street, critical infrastructure such as power grids, and civil aviation generally. According to the 9/11 Commission, the 1995 Estimate was "an excellent summary of the emerging danger, based on what was then known."¹⁰⁶

That 1995 NIE should have informed and generated subsequent strategic analyses, serving as a touchstone for considering the meaning of new

intelligence and making new judgments about the nature and danger of the evolving terrorist threat. It didn't. In fact, over the next two years, U.S. intelligence agencies made important new discoveries about bin Laden and al-Qaeda, learning that bin Laden was a mastermind rather than merely a financier of international terrorism, and that al-Qaeda had been involved in other terrorist attacks against Americans, most notably the 1993 shootdown of U.S. Army Blackhawk helicopters in Mogadishu, Somalia.¹⁰⁷ None of this information, however, made its way into the 1997 updated National Intelligence Estimate. Indeed, the 1997 NIE devoted just three sentences out of six pages to bin Laden, and did not mention al-Qaeda even once.

More stunning, 1997 was the last time any National Intelligence Estimate focused on foreign terrorism until the 11 September 2001, attacks.¹⁰⁸ Even after the embassy bombings of 1998, after the foiled Millennium attacks of late 1999, after the bombing of the USS *Cole* in 2000, after Director Tenet warned Congress that there "was not the slightest doubt" bin Laden and his allies were planning more attacks against the U.S.,¹⁰⁹ and after the FBI placed Osama bin Laden on its Ten Most Wanted List, the U.S. Intelligence Community produced no National Intelligence Estimate that laid out its best strategic judgments about the United States's principal enemy. As one former member of the National Intelligence Council noted, "The lack of an NIE is a strong piece of evidence that Director Tenet and the Intelligence Community failed to take a strategic view of the terrorism threat."¹¹⁰

As with human intelligence, strategic analysis suffered because of shortcomings in the CIA's structure, culture, and incentive systems. Strategic analysis of al-Qaeda was supposed to be coordinated across the Intelligence Community and produced by the CIA's Counterterrorist Center. But the Center was not housed as a stand-alone unit or placed inside the CIA's analytic branch, the Directorate of Intelligence. Instead, it was embedded in the Directorate of Operations, which runs clandestine human intelligence operations. This location made all the difference. Because it was viewed as an operations shop, the Counterterrorist Center had difficulty attracting top-flight analysts, and focused more on reporting current activities in the field than analysis.¹¹¹ Deputy Director of Central Intelligence (DDCI) John McLaughlin admitted that even the Counterterrorist Center's designated analysis group dealt mostly with intelligence collection issues.¹¹² By the end of 2000, DCI Tenet had become so concerned about the inadequacy of the Counterterrorist Center's strategic analysis that he appointed a senior manager to address the problem. A few months later, he went further, establishing a new 10-person strategic assessments branch inside the center. Even then, however, the Counterterrorist Center struggled to fill the slots. The new chief of the

strategic assessments branch started work on 10 September 2001, the day before the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks.¹¹³

Cultural pathologies exacerbated these structural problems. Nowhere was the “need to know” more deeply rooted than inside the CIA’s clandestine Directorate of Operations. Viewing themselves as members of an elite group, working in spectacular isolation, upholding the protection of sources and methods as a cardinal virtue, clandestine officials tended to view all analysts with suspicion, even disdain. Many analysts complained about the lack of trust between collectors and analysts across the Intelligence Community during the House and Senate Intelligence Committees’ Joint Inquiry.¹¹⁴ Even within the CIA, poor information sharing and mistrust between collectors and analysts was well known. When the Counterterrorist Center was created in 1986, for example, DO personnel assigned there soon requested additional safes and procedures to keep their information out of the hands of analysts working beside them—despite the fact that the Center was designed to foster precisely this kind of collaboration between analysts and operators, and that everyone held the same level of security clearance.¹¹⁵ Old attitudes proved hard to change. Fifteen years later, after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, many analysts still complained about the lack of trust between collectors and analysts across the Intelligence Community.¹¹⁶ This reluctance to share, combined with the DO’s natural focus on operations, ensured that the Counterterrorist Center would give short shrift to collaborative strategic analysis.

Finally, career incentives also impeded the development of a robust strategic analysis capability. As noted, long-term analysis generally took a back seat to managing current crises. This trend grew only worse with time, as CNN and other news organizations began reporting news around the clock, and as policymakers demanded more current intelligence briefings in response to breaking developments.¹¹⁷ But promotion incentives inside the CIA did not provide a counterweight to this trend. If anything, they reinforced it, rewarding analysts for the number of items they produced in current intelligence products such as the *President’s Daily Brief* rather than the quality of longer-term analyses distributed in other products. When asked about the inattention to strategic analysis, many intelligence officials complained that because the CIA lacked incentives to reward long-term thinking, by the end of the 1990s, it had become “CNN with secrets.”¹¹⁸

For career-minded analysts, the message was clear: stay away from strategic assignments. Indeed, the only thing worse than a strategic assignment was a strategic assignment located outside the CIA’s analytic branch—precisely what Director Tenet advocated in 2000 and 2001. Little wonder the DCI found the Center’s strategic analytic capabilities so weak, and struggled with such little success to fix them before 11 September.

On average, Counterterrorist Center analysts had just three years of experience, compared to eight years in the CIA's analytic branch, the Directorate of Intelligence.¹¹⁹ While experience in any business usually makes an employee more valuable, experience was especially important for strategic intelligence analysis, which requires understanding foreign cultures, piecing together bits of information to discern patterns and gaps, and making judgments about unknown futures. Career incentives meant that the unit most in need of experienced analysts to conduct strategic analysis did not have them.¹²⁰

STRUCTURAL DEFICIENCIES PREVAIL

The story of the CIA's missed opportunities began years before 11 September. Throughout the 1990s, as Osama bin Laden's terrorist network grew stronger, the CIA grew weaker. While al-Qaeda operatives learned how to use low-tech weapons like box cutters and truck bombs, U.S. intelligence budgets continued to favor high technology—building technical collection systems to do things like take pictures from space rather than reinvigorating the CIA's human intelligence service to penetrate a new enemy on the ground. As bin Laden's suicide Jihadists traveled from caves to condominiums, the CIA's clandestine Directorate of Operations continued operating out of U.S. embassies and working the diplomatic circuit. While bin Laden and his associates spent years devising plans for their terrorist attacks, carefully and patiently working out the details, the CIA became CNN with secrets, responding to the "crisis du jour" rather than producing longer-term strategic analysis about dangers looming over the horizon. Developing more disruption opportunities required two key capabilities: penetrating the enemy and developing a strategic understanding of the threat before it was too late. The CIA could not do either well. The Agency's human intelligence and strategic analysis capabilities were withering just when they were needed most.

As in the case of the eleven missed opportunities, organizational problems are to blame. Structural deficiencies left no one in charge to manage the seams, either inside the CIA or between the Agency and the rest of the U.S. Intelligence Community. The same fragmentation that enabled terrorists to move from Malaysia to Thailand unnoticed also ensured that intelligence budgets would pay too much attention to developing satellites and not enough to recruiting spies. Without mechanisms to integrate the Intelligence Community, the whole became less than the sum of the parts. Cultural pathologies—agency parochialism, resistance to change, and the penchant for secrecy—not only kept CIA officials from sharing information about two of the hijackers with their FBI counterparts before the attacks, but prevented the CIA from developing the kinds of collection

and analysis capabilities needed to generate key leads in the first place. The same incentives that discouraged interagency collaboration and big picture analysis in the summer of 2001 also undermined counterterrorism efforts throughout the preceding decade. These organizational problems, in short, had profound effects on the CIA's capabilities. While individuals made mistakes, organizational deficiencies were the root cause of 11 September.

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- ³⁹ *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 260.
- ⁴⁰ Specific word counts are: 383 words for historical intelligence, 83 devoted to current intelligence. Word count does not include title or portions redacted in declassification.
- ⁴¹ “Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in U.S.,” *President’s Daily Brief*, 6 August 2001, printed in *9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 261–262.
- ⁴² *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 260.
- ⁴³ Condoleezza Rice, testimony before The 9/11 Commission ninth public hearing (transcript), 8 April 2004, p. 24. http://www.9-11commission.gov/archive/hearing9/9-11Commission_Hearing_2004-04-08.pdf (accessed 1 March 2006).
- ⁴⁴ The third piece of intelligence noted “CIA and the FBI are investigating a call to our Embassy in the UAE in May saying that a group of bin Laden supporters was in the US planning attacks with explosives.” Although the George W. Bush White House issued a fact sheet stating that no information confirmed the connection between this call and the 11 September attacks, the fact sheet stopped short of dismissing the possibility or issuing a definitive judgment on the matter. “Fact Sheet: The August 6, 2001 PDB,” Press release, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, issued 10 April 2004, available at www.Whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/04/print/20040410-5.html [accessed 17 September 2004].
- ⁴⁵ “Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in U.S.,” *President’s Daily Brief*, 6 August 2001, pp. 261–262. For information about the mistaken claims of New York surveillance activities discussed in the *PDB*, see “Background Briefing Via Conference Call on the President’s PDB of August 6, 2001,” Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, 10 April 2004, available at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/04/20040410-6.html [accessed 17 September 2004]; “Fact Sheet: The August 6, 2001 PDB,” Press release, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, issued 10 April 2004, available at www.Whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/04/print/20040410-5.html [accessed 17 September 2004]; Matthew Cooper, Elaine Shannon, Viveca Novak, “Probing the Memo,” *Time*, 19 April 2004, p. 19.
- ⁴⁶ Senior FBI officials, including Acting Director Thomas Pickard and Counterterrorism Chief Dale Watson, knew nothing about Moussaoui’s case.
- ⁴⁷ *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 259.
- ⁴⁸ The 9/11 Commission, Staff Statement Number 11, pp. 11–12.

- ⁴⁹ The 9/11 Commission, tenth public hearing (transcript) 14 April 2004, p. 57. http://www.9-11commission.gov/archive/hearing10/9-11Commission_Hearing_2004-04-14.pdf (accessed 1 March 2006); The 9/11 Commission, "Threats and Responses in 2001," Staff Statement Number 10, 13 April 2004, p. 5. http://www.9-11commission.gov/staff_statements/staff_statement_10.pdf (accessed 1 March 2006).
- ⁵⁰ *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 275.
- ⁵¹ George Tenet, submitted testimony before The 9/11 Commission, tenth public hearing, 14 April 2004, p. 5. http://www.9-11commission.gov/hearings/hearing10/tenet_statement.pdf (accessed 1 March 2006).
- ⁵² *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 265.
- ⁵³ Janet Reno, "Testimony of Janet Reno, Former Attorney General of the United States before the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States," p. 6.
- ⁵⁴ Interview, March 2004.
- ⁵⁵ Interview, March 2004.
- ⁵⁶ Interview, December 2004.
- ⁵⁷ Interview, July 2004.
- ⁵⁸ "The Performance of the Intelligence Community," Staff Statement Number 11, The 9/11 Commission, 14 April 2004, p. 4.
- ⁵⁹ *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 254.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 341–342.
- ⁶¹ Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1962).
- ⁶² Bruce Berkowitz, "Spying in the Post-September 11 World," *Hoover Digest*, No. 4, 2003.
- ⁶³ National Security Agency Director Lt. General Michael Hayden, quoted in James Bamford, "War of Secrets: Eyes in the Sky, Ears to the Wall, and Still Wanting," *The New York Times*, 8 September 2002, section 4, p. 5.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁵ John Diamond, "Terror Group's Messengers Steer Clear of NSA," *USA Today*, 18 October 2002, p. 12A.
- ⁶⁶ Dale Watson, hearing of Senate and House Intelligence Committees, 107th Cong., 2d sess., 26 September 2002.
- ⁶⁷ "Three 9/11 Hijackers: Identification, Watchlisting, and Tracking," Staff Statement No. 2, p. 3.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ⁶⁹ Quotes from Intelligence Community communications of 28 June 2001 and 10 July 2001, reprinted in *Joint Inquiry Report*, p. 7.
- ⁷⁰ *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 259.
- ⁷¹ For details about steps the U.S. government took in the summer of 2001, see *9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 256–265.

- ⁷² As the 9/11 Commission staff concluded, “There was no comprehensive collection strategy to pull together human sources, imagery, signals intelligence, and open sources. (“The Performance of the Intelligence Community,” Staff statement Number 11, 9/11 Commission, 14 April 2004, p. 9.)
- ⁷³ *Joint Inquiry Report*, pp. 385–388; George Tenet, testimony before the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 14 April 2004, p. 5.
- ⁷⁴ Robert Bryant, John Hamre, John Lawn, John MacGaffin, Howard Shapiro, and Jeffrey Smith, “America Needs More Spies,” *The Economist*, 12 July 2003.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁶ Interview, March 2004.
- ⁷⁷ Interview, June 2004.
- ⁷⁸ *Joint Inquiry Report*, p. 387.
- ⁷⁹ In late 2004, the public got a rare glimpse of the powerful influence of the Pentagon over intelligence priorities when members of the Senate Intelligence Committee took the highly unusual step of publicly opposing a secret \$9.5 billion spy satellite system. The system, which was at the time the single biggest item in the U.S. intelligence budget, had been unanimously opposed by the Senate Intelligence Committee for two years because members considered it to be ineffective, duplicative, and expensive. As one former government official with knowledge of the program noted, “There are already so many satellites in orbit that our adversaries already assume that just about anything done in plain sight is watched, so it’s hard to believe a new satellite . . . could make much of a difference.” Instead, the official said, “this money could be much better spent on the kind of human intelligence needed to penetrated closed regimes and terrorist networks.” Yet the program continued to be funded because it had the support of Pentagon supporters on the House and Senate Appropriations Committees. Douglas Jehl, “New Spy Plan Said to Involve Satellite System,” *The New York Times*, 12 December 2004, p. 1. See also Douglas Jehl, “Debate on Secret Program Burts into Open,” *The New York Times*, 10 December 2004, p. 24; Ted Bridis, “Lawmaker Vows Efforts to Kill ‘Wasteful’ Mystery Spy Project,” Associated Press, 9 December 2004.
- ⁸⁰ Interview, June 2005.
- ⁸¹ Interview, June 2005.
- ⁸² At the time, the National Foreign Intelligence Program (NFIP) budget comprised between one-half and two-thirds of total intelligence spending, covering all foreign intelligence and counterintelligence activities that served national needs rather the needs of a particular department or agency. See Stephen Daggett, “The U.S. Intelligence Budget: A Basic Overview,” Congressional Research Service Report RS21945, 24 September 2004.
- ⁸³ Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1998, 105 H. Rpt. 135 part I, 105th Cong., 1st session, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 18 June 1997, p. 25.

- ⁸⁴ Total intelligence spending is normally classified. In 1997 and 1998, however, Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet released total budget figures to the public.
- ⁸⁵ In 1996, the Aspin-Brown Commission reported that the National Foreign Intelligence Program comprised two thirds of total intelligence spending. Given the 1997 declassified intelligence budget was \$26.6 billion, the 1997 NFIP program would have been about \$17.73 billion. Conservatively estimating HUMINT's "single digit" share at 9 percent of NFIP funds provides an estimate of \$1.6 billion in national clandestine human intelligence spending for fiscal year 1997. In August 1998, when a spy satellite blew up shortly after launch, news media widely reported its cost to be \$1 billion, and the cost of the Titan 4A rocket that launched it at \$400 million. See for example David Stout, "Air Force Rocket Explodes Just After Liftoff," *The New York Times*, 13 August 1998, p. A16.
- ⁸⁶ Interview, June 2004.
- ⁸⁷ Tim Weiner, "Hide and Seek: To Fight in the Shadows, Get Better Eyes," *The New York Times*, 7 October 2001, Section 4, p. 1.
- ⁸⁸ Interview, March 2004.
- ⁸⁹ Interview, June 2005.
- ⁹⁰ John Walcott and Brian Duffy, "The CIA's Darkest Secrets," *U.S. News & World Report*, 4 July 1994, p. 46.
- ⁹¹ Edward G. Shirley, pseudonym for Reuel Marc Gerecht, "Can't Anybody Here Play this Game?," *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1998, p. 48.
- ⁹² Reuel Marc Gerecht, under the pseudonym Edward G. Shirley, "Can't Anybody Here Play This Game?" p. 48. Interviews with three former clandestine officials December 2004. Robert Baer, one of the CIA's veteran agents in the Middle East, put it this way: "The DO has an attitude that people are fungible. It's like General Motors. It's a Harvard Business School idea. It's the wrong approach. We need to build expertise, train people and keep them in one area for longer periods of time." Interview, November 2004.
- ⁹³ See Reuel Marc Gerecht, "The Counterterrorist Myth," *The Atlantic Monthly*, July/August 2001, pp. 38–42.
- ⁹⁴ Interview, December 2004.
- ⁹⁵ Interview, December 2004.
- ⁹⁶ Interview, November 2004.
- ⁹⁷ Interview, November 2004.
- ⁹⁸ Interview, June 2004.
- ⁹⁹ Interview, December 2004.
- ¹⁰⁰ Interview, December 2004.
- ¹⁰¹ Interview, December 2004.
- ¹⁰² 9/11 Commission Staff Statement #11, 14 April 2004, p. 3.
- ¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

- ¹⁰⁵ Although the National Intelligence Council includes personnel from other agencies, it reports to the Director of Central Intelligence, is housed in the CIA headquarters building, and has historically been dominated by the CIA.
- ¹⁰⁶ *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 341.
- ¹⁰⁷ The 1997 NIE's omission of al-Qaeda's involvement in the Somalia "Black Hawk Down" incident was the subject of one of the most testy exchanges in the 9/11 Commission's public hearings. Former Senator Robert Kerrey, one of the Commissioners, began drilling Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet: "Why? Why was it not in the update? What didn't the president of the United States and the key policymakers get this information?" When Tenet replied that important information is not always included in the National Intelligence Estimate, Kerrey became irate. "The NIE is a foundational document that lots of people use," he shot back. "Now I've got to tell you, I think if the president of the United States of America had come and said that Osama bin Laden and Al Qaida is responsible for shooting down a Black Hawk helicopter in 1993, I believe that speech would have galvanized the United States of America against bin Laden... I think [it] would have given you permission to do operations that you didn't have permission to do. [It] would have changed the whole dynamic." Bob Kerrey, 9/11 Commission Tenth Public Hearing (transcript), 14 April 2004, p. 25. http://www.9-11commission.gov/archive/hearing10/9-11Commission_Hearing_2004-04-14.pdf (accessed 24 February 2006).
- ¹⁰⁸ *9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 341–343.
- ¹⁰⁹ George Tenet, "Worldwide Threats to U.S. National Security," testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 106th Cong., 1st sess., 2 February 1999.
- ¹¹⁰ Interview, June 2005.
- ¹¹¹ *Joint Inquiry Report*, pp. 336–341; 9/11 Commission Staff Statement #11, April 14, 2004, p. 5.
- ¹¹² *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 342.
- ¹¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹⁴ *Joint Inquiry Report*, p. 342.
- ¹¹⁵ Interview, December 2004.
- ¹¹⁶ *Joint Inquiry Report*, p. 342.
- ¹¹⁷ 9/11 Staff Statement #11, p. 3.
- ¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹⁹ *Joint Inquiry Report*, pp. 339–340.
- ¹²⁰ *Joint Inquiry Report*, p. 340. Cofer Black, who headed CIA Counterterrorist Center from 1999 to 2002, testified that investment in tactical intelligence far outstripped resources dedicated to strategic intelligence. (Joint Inquiry Hearing, "9/11 Intelligence Investigation," 107th Cong., 2d sess, 26 September 2002).

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