

The National Interest *online*

Rapid Reaction: Blame Game at the CIA

by Amy Zegart

08.23.2007

The single greatest indictment of the inspector general's report into pre-9/11 intelligence lapses is not contained within its declassified Executive Summary, according to Amy Zegart, associate professor of public policy at UCLA and the author of the forthcoming "Spying Blind: The CIA, the FBI and the Origins of 9/11."

Rather it is the fact that two consecutive directors have attempted to prevent its airing to the public, from Porter Goss to Michael Hayden. Such behavior, said Zegart in an interview with National Interest Online, amounts to "an appalling indictment of [the CIA's] unwillingness to air its dirty laundry." And that unwillingness, Zegart notes, naturally prevents the intelligence community from learning and analyzing the mistakes that were made before the terrorist attacks.

Zegart notes that the strategic myopia on intelligence prior to 9/11 was so widespread—from Congress to the Pentagon to the presidents for the past 50 years—that she believes that the report's fingering of three culprits (George Tenet, former CIA director; James Pavitt, former deputy director for operations; J. Cofer Black, former director of the Counterterrorist Center) in the declassified version is inappropriately narrow. However, the attempts by those and others to bog down reform efforts after 9/11 are inexcusable, she adds. The attacks should have served as an unmistakable clarion call—pyrotechnics included—for introspection and action.

System Failure

The three key pieces of newly declassified information detailed in the summary of the report all point to systemic failures of the agency, said Zegart. Although there is a widespread notion that counter-terrorism intelligence efforts faltered in part due to insufficient funds, as Cofer Black has argued in front of Congress, the report demonstrates that resources allocated towards counter-terror intelligence operations were diverted to other parts of the agency, demonstrating short-sightedness at the highest level.

The report also demonstrates just how broadly that intelligence cables related to two of the 9/11 hijackers (Nawaf al-Hamzi and Khalid al-Mihdar) were seen within the agency. Anywhere from 50 to 60 individuals saw at least one or more of those cables indicating they could be in the United States, and yet the names of

those hijackers failed to make it onto the State Department watchlist—demonstrating a level of incompetence among the agency’s analytical footmen.

And finally, those analysts responsible for surveillance of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed were so narrowly preoccupied with tracking his footsteps, they fatally failed to note who he had made relationships with. The agency knew Mohammed was recruiting terrorists to travel around the world, including to the United States, to stage attacks. It was also known that al-Hamzi and al-Mihdar had assisted an Al-Qaeda planning conference in Malaysia in January, 2000—which was the brainchild of Mohammed—but somehow the fact that it was known those individuals could be in the United States failed to set off the appropriate alarms or to be communicated to appropriate officials, including those in the FBI.

Culture Matters

There is evidence that many of the kind of shortfalls the inspector general’s report details remain a problem today, Zegart said. "Reform tends to be long on structure, short on culture," she said. "It always comes down to: ‘when in doubt create a new agency. Or, when in doubt, create several new agencies.’"

A brief surf on the FBI’s website, Zegart noted, reveals the short shrift that analysts are given. While FBI special agents are still upheld as the elite within the bureau, the analysts are listed under its "professional support staff", along with secretaries and mechanics.

In the final analysis, the inspector general’s money quote, said Zegart, is its reference to "a systemic breakdown." The system remains in dire need of repair.

Interview with Amy Zegart written by Ximena Ortiz, editor-at-large of *The National Interest*.

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P.O. Box 622 Shrub Oak NY 10588

The National Interest is published by The Nixon Center

The Nixon Center
1615 L Street, Suite 1250
Washington, DC 20036
www.nixoncenter.org