

“THE SYSTEM WAS BLINKING RED”

8.1 THE SUMMER OF THREAT

As 2001 began, counterterrorism officials were receiving frequent but fragmentary reports about threats. Indeed, there appeared to be possible threats almost everywhere the United States had interests—including at home.

To understand how the escalation in threat reporting was handled in the summer of 2001, it is useful to understand how threat information in general is collected and conveyed. Information is collected through several methods, including signals intelligence and interviews of human sources, and gathered into intelligence reports. Depending on the source and nature of the reporting, these reports may be highly classified—and therefore tightly held—or less sensitive and widely disseminated to state and local law enforcement agencies. Threat reporting must be disseminated, either through individual reports or through threat advisories. Such advisories, intended to alert their recipients, may address a specific threat or be a general warning.

Because the amount of reporting is so voluminous, only a select fraction can be chosen for briefing the president and senior officials. During 2001, Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet was briefed regularly regarding threats and other operational information relating to Usama Bin Ladin.¹ He in turn met daily with President Bush, who was briefed by the CIA through what is known as the President’s Daily Brief (PDB). Each PDB consists of a series of six to eight relatively short articles or briefs covering a broad array of topics; CIA staff decides which subjects are the most important on any given day. There were more than 40 intelligence articles in the PDBs from January 20 to September 10, 2001, that related to Bin Ladin. The PDB is considered highly sensitive and is distributed to only a handful of high-level officials.²

The Senior Executive Intelligence Brief (SEIB), distributed to a broader group of officials, has a similar format and generally covers the same subjects as the PDB. It usually contains less information so as to protect sources and

methods. Like their predecessors, the Attorney General, the FBI Director, and Richard Clarke, the National Security Council (NSC) counterterrorism coordinator, all received the SEIB, not the PDB.³ Clarke and his staff had extensive access to terrorism reporting, but they did not have access to internal, nondisseminated information at the National Security Agency (NSA), CIA, or FBI.

The Drumbeat Begins

In the spring of 2001, the level of reporting on terrorist threats and planned attacks increased dramatically to its highest level since the millennium alert. At the end of March, the intelligence community disseminated a terrorist threat advisory, indicating a heightened threat of Sunni extremist terrorist attacks against U.S. facilities, personnel, and other interests.⁴

On March 23, in connection with discussions about possibly reopening Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House, Clarke warned National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice that domestic or foreign terrorists might use a truck bomb—their “weapon of choice”—on Pennsylvania Avenue. That would result, he said, in the destruction of the West Wing and parts of the residence.⁵ He also told her that he thought there were terrorist cells within the United States, including al Qaeda.

The next week, Rice was briefed on the activities of Abu Zubaydah and on CIA efforts to locate him. As pointed out in chapter 6, Abu Zubaydah had been a major figure in the millennium plots. Over the next few weeks, the CIA repeatedly issued warnings—including calls from DCI Tenet to Clarke—that Abu Zubaydah was planning an operation in the near future. One report cited a source indicating that Abu Zubaydah was planning an attack in a country that CIA analysts thought might be Israel, or perhaps Saudi Arabia or India. Clarke relayed these reports to Rice.⁶

In response to these threats, the FBI sent a message to all its field offices on April 13, summarizing reporting to date. It asked the offices to task all resources, including human sources and electronic databases, for any information pertaining to “current operational activities relating to Sunni extremism.” It did not suggest that there was a domestic threat.⁷

The interagency Counterterrorism Security Group (CSG) that Clarke chaired discussed the Abu Zubaydah reports on April 19. The next day, a briefing to top officials reported “Bin Ladin planning multiple operations.” When the deputies discussed al Qaeda policy on April 30, they began with a briefing on the threat.⁸

In May 2001, the drumbeat of reporting grew louder with reports to top officials that “Bin Ladin public profile may presage attack” and “Bin Ladin network’s plans advancing.” In early May, a walk-in to the FBI claimed there was a plan to launch attacks on London, Boston, and New York. Attorney General John Ashcroft was briefed by the CIA on May 15 regarding al Qaeda generally and the current threat reporting specifically. The next day brought a report

that a phone call to a U.S. embassy had warned that Bin Ladin supporters were planning an attack in the United States using “high explosives.” On May 17, based on the previous day’s report, the first item on the CSG’s agenda was “UBL: Operation Planned in U.S.”⁹ The anonymous caller’s tip could not be corroborated.

Late May brought reports of a possible hostage plot against Americans abroad to force the release of prisoners, including Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, the “Blind Sheikh,” who was serving a life sentence for his role in the 1993 plot to blow up sites in New York City. The reporting noted that operatives might opt to hijack an aircraft or storm a U.S. embassy. This report led to a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) information circular to airlines noting the potential for “an airline hijacking to free terrorists incarcerated in the United States.” Other reporting mentioned that Abu Zubaydah was planning an attack, possibly against Israel, and expected to carry out several more if things went well. On May 24 alone, counterterrorism officials grappled with reports alleging plots in Yemen and Italy, as well as a report about a cell in Canada that an anonymous caller had claimed might be planning an attack against the United States.¹⁰

Reports similar to many of these were made available to President Bush in morning intelligence briefings with DCI Tenet, usually attended by Vice President Dick Cheney and National Security Advisor Rice. While these briefings discussed general threats to attack America and American interests, the specific threats mentioned in these briefings were all overseas.

On May 29, Clarke suggested that Rice ask DCI Tenet what more the United States could do to stop Abu Zubaydah from launching “a series of major terrorist attacks,” probably on Israeli targets, but possibly on U.S. facilities. Clarke wrote to Rice and her deputy, Stephen Hadley, “When these attacks occur, as they likely will, we will wonder what more we could have done to stop them.” In May, CIA Counterterrorist Center (CTC) Chief Cofer Black told Rice that the current threat level was a 7 on a scale of 1 to 10, as compared to an 8 during the millennium.¹¹

High Probability of Near-Term “Spectacular” Attacks

Threat reports surged in June and July, reaching an even higher peak of urgency. The summer threats seemed to be focused on Saudi Arabia, Israel, Bahrain, Kuwait, Yemen, and possibly Rome, but the danger could be anywhere—including a possible attack on the G-8 summit in Genoa. A June 12 CIA report passing along biographical background information on several terrorists mentioned, in commenting on Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, that he was recruiting people to travel to the United States to meet with colleagues already there so that they might conduct terrorist attacks on Bin Ladin’s behalf. On June 22, the CIA notified all its station chiefs about intelligence suggesting a possible al Qaeda suicide attack on a U.S. target over the next few days. DCI Tenet asked that all U.S. ambassadors be briefed.¹²

That same day, the State Department notified all embassies of the terrorist threat and updated its worldwide public warning. In June, the State Department initiated the Visa Express program in Saudi Arabia as a security measure, in order to keep long lines of foreigners away from vulnerable embassy spaces. The program permitted visa applications to be made through travel agencies, instead of directly at the embassy or consulate.¹³

A terrorist threat advisory distributed in late June indicated a high probability of near-term “spectacular” terrorist attacks resulting in numerous casualties. Other reports’ titles warned, “Bin Ladin Attacks May be Imminent” and “Bin Ladin and Associates Making Near-Term Threats.” The latter reported multiple attacks planned over the coming days, including a “severe blow” against U.S. and Israeli “interests” during the next two weeks.¹⁴

On June 21, near the height of the threat reporting, U.S. Central Command raised the force protection condition level for U.S. troops in six countries to the highest possible level, Delta. The U.S. Fifth Fleet moved out of its port in Bahrain, and a U.S. Marine Corps exercise in Jordan was halted. U.S. embassies in the Persian Gulf conducted an emergency security review, and the embassy in Yemen was closed. The CSG had foreign emergency response teams, known as FESTs, ready to move on four hours’ notice and kept up the terrorism alert posture on a “rolling 24 hour basis.”¹⁵

On June 25, Clarke warned Rice and Hadley that six separate intelligence reports showed al Qaeda personnel warning of a pending attack. An Arabic television station reported Bin Ladin’s pleasure with al Qaeda leaders who were saying that the next weeks “will witness important surprises” and that U.S. and Israeli interests will be targeted. Al Qaeda also released a new recruitment and fund-raising tape. Clarke wrote that this was all too sophisticated to be merely a psychological operation to keep the United States on edge, and the CIA agreed. The intelligence reporting consistently described the upcoming attacks as occurring on a calamitous level, indicating that they would cause the world to be in turmoil and that they would consist of possible multiple—but not necessarily simultaneous—attacks.¹⁶

On June 28, Clarke wrote Rice that the pattern of al Qaeda activity indicating attack planning over the past six weeks “had reached a crescendo.” “A series of new reports continue to convince me and analysts at State, CIA, DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency], and NSA that a major terrorist attack or series of attacks is likely in July,” he noted. One al Qaeda intelligence report warned that something “very, very, very, very” big was about to happen, and most of Bin Ladin’s network was reportedly anticipating the attack. In late June, the CIA ordered all its station chiefs to share information on al Qaeda with their host governments and to push for immediate disruptions of cells.¹⁷

The headline of a June 30 briefing to top officials was stark: “Bin Ladin Planning High-Profile Attacks.” The report stated that Bin Ladin operatives expected near-term attacks to have dramatic consequences of catastrophic pro-

portions. That same day, Saudi Arabia declared its highest level of terror alert. Despite evidence of delays possibly caused by heightened U.S. security, the planning for attacks was continuing.¹⁸

On July 2, the FBI Counterterrorism Division sent a message to federal agencies and state and local law enforcement agencies summarizing information regarding threats from Bin Ladin. It warned that there was an increased volume of threat reporting, indicating a potential for attacks against U.S. targets abroad from groups “aligned with or sympathetic to Usama Bin Ladin.” Despite the general warnings, the message further stated, “The FBI has no information indicating a credible threat of terrorist attack in the United States.” However, it went on to emphasize that the possibility of attack in the United States could not be discounted. It also noted that the July 4 holiday might heighten the threats. The report asked recipients to “exercise extreme vigilance” and “report suspicious activities” to the FBI. It did not suggest specific actions that they should take to prevent attacks.¹⁹

Disruption operations against al Qaeda-affiliated cells were launched involving 20 countries. Several terrorist operatives were detained by foreign governments, possibly disrupting operations in the Gulf and Italy and perhaps averting attacks against two or three U.S. embassies. Clarke and others told us of a particular concern about possible attacks on the Fourth of July. After it passed uneventfully, the CSG decided to maintain the alert.²⁰

To enlist more international help, Vice President Cheney contacted Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah on July 5. Hadley apparently called European counterparts, while Clarke worked with senior officials in the Gulf. In late July, because of threats, Italy closed the airspace over Genoa and mounted anti-aircraft batteries at the Genoa airport during the G-8 summit, which President Bush attended.²¹

At home, the CSG arranged for the CIA to brief intelligence and security officials from several domestic agencies. On July 5, representatives from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the FAA, the Coast Guard, the Secret Service, Customs, the CIA, and the FBI met with Clarke to discuss the current threat. Attendees report that they were told not to disseminate the threat information they received at the meeting. They interpreted this direction to mean that although they could brief their superiors, they could not send out advisories to the field. An NSC official recalls a somewhat different emphasis, saying that attendees were asked to take the information back to their home agencies and “do what you can” with it, subject to classification and distribution restrictions. A representative from the INS asked for a summary of the information that she could share with field offices. She never received one.²²

That same day, the CIA briefed Attorney General Ashcroft on the al Qaeda threat, warning that a significant terrorist attack was imminent. Ashcroft was told that preparations for multiple attacks were in late stages or already com-

plete and that little additional warning could be expected. The briefing addressed only threats outside the United States.²³

The next day, the CIA representative told the CSG that al Qaeda members believed the upcoming attack would be “spectacular,” qualitatively different from anything they had done to date.²⁴

Apparently as a result of the July 5 meeting with Clarke, the interagency committee on federal building security was tasked to examine security measures. This committee met on July 9, when 37 officials from 27 agencies and organizations were briefed on the “current threat level” in the United States. They were told that not only the threat reports from abroad but also the recent convictions in the East Africa bombings trial, the conviction of Ahmed Ressam, and the just-returned Khobar Towers indictments reinforced the need to “exercise extreme vigilance.” Attendees were expected to determine whether their respective agencies needed enhanced security measures.²⁵

On July 18, 2001, the State Department provided a warning to the public regarding possible terrorist attacks in the Arabian Peninsula.²⁶

Acting FBI Director Thomas Pickard told us he had one of his periodic conference calls with all special agents in charge on July 19. He said one of the items he mentioned was the need, in light of increased threat reporting, to have evidence response teams ready to move at a moment’s notice, in case of an attack.²⁷ He did not task field offices to try to determine whether any plots were being considered within the United States or to take any action to disrupt any such plots.

In mid-July, reporting started to indicate that Bin Ladin’s plans had been delayed, maybe for as long as two months, but not abandoned. On July 23, the lead item for CSG discussion was still the al Qaeda threat, and it included mention of suspected terrorist travel to the United States.²⁸

On July 31, an FAA circular appeared alerting the aviation community to “reports of possible near-term terrorist operations . . . particularly on the Arabian Peninsula and/or Israel.” It stated that the FAA had no credible evidence of specific plans to attack U.S. civil aviation, though it noted that some of the “currently active” terrorist groups were known to “plan and train for hijackings” and were able to build and conceal sophisticated explosive devices in luggage and consumer products.²⁹

Tenet told us that in his world “the system was blinking red.” By late July, Tenet said, it could not “get any worse.”³⁰ Not everyone was convinced. Some asked whether all these threats might just be deception. On June 30, the SEIB contained an article titled “Bin Ladin Threats Are Real.” Yet Hadley told Tenet in July that Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz questioned the reporting. Perhaps Bin Ladin was trying to study U.S. reactions. Tenet replied that he had already addressed the Defense Department’s questions on this point; the reporting was convincing. To give a sense of his anxiety at the time, one senior

official in the Counterterrorist Center told us that he and a colleague were considering resigning in order to go public with their concerns.³¹

The Calm Before the Storm

On July 27, Clarke informed Rice and Hadley that the spike in intelligence about a near-term al Qaeda attack had stopped. He urged keeping readiness high during the August vacation period, warning that another report suggested an attack had just been postponed for a few months “but will still happen.”³²

On August 1, the FBI issued an advisory that in light of the increased volume of threat reporting and the upcoming anniversary of the East Africa embassy bombings, increased attention should be paid to security planning. It noted that although most of the reporting indicated a potential for attacks on U.S. interests abroad, the possibility of an attack in the United States could not be discounted.³³

On August 3, the intelligence community issued an advisory concluding that the threat of impending al Qaeda attacks would likely continue indefinitely. Citing threats in the Arabian Peninsula, Jordan, Israel, and Europe, the advisory suggested that al Qaeda was lying in wait and searching for gaps in security before moving forward with the planned attacks.³⁴

During the spring and summer of 2001, President Bush had on several occasions asked his briefers whether any of the threats pointed to the United States. Reflecting on these questions, the CIA decided to write a briefing article summarizing its understanding of this danger. Two CIA analysts involved in preparing this briefing article believed it represented an opportunity to communicate their view that the threat of a Bin Ladin attack in the United States remained both current and serious.³⁵ The result was an article in the August 6 Presidential Daily Brief titled “Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in US.” It was the 36th PDB item briefed so far that year that related to Bin Ladin or al Qaeda, and the first devoted to the possibility of an attack in the United States.

The President told us the August 6 report was historical in nature. President Bush said the article told him that al Qaeda was dangerous, which he said he had known since he had become President. The President said Bin Ladin had long been talking about his desire to attack America. He recalled some operational data on the FBI, and remembered thinking it was heartening that 70 investigations were under way. As best he could recollect, Rice had mentioned that the Yemenis’ surveillance of a federal building in New York had been looked into in May and June, but there was no actionable intelligence.

He did not recall discussing the August 6 report with the Attorney General or whether Rice had done so. He said that if his advisers had told him there was a cell in the United States, they would have moved to take care of it. That never happened.³⁶

Although the following day’s SEIB repeated the title of this PDB, it did not contain the reference to hijackings, the alert in New York, the alleged casing

The following is the text of an item from the Presidential Daily Brief received by President George W. Bush on August 6, 2001.³⁷ Redacted material is indicated by brackets.

Bin Ladin Determined To Strike in US

Clandestine, foreign government, and media reports indicate Bin Ladin since 1997 has wanted to conduct terrorist attacks in the US. Bin Ladin implied in US television interviews in 1997 and 1998 that his followers would follow the example of World Trade Center bomber Ramzi Yousef and “bring the fighting to America.”

After US missile strikes on his base in Afghanistan in 1998, Bin Ladin told followers he wanted to retaliate in Washington, according to a [—] service.

An Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) operative told an [—] service at the same time that Bin Ladin was planning to exploit the operative’s access to the US to mount a terrorist strike.

The millennium plotting in Canada in 1999 may have been part of Bin Ladin’s first serious attempt to implement a terrorist strike in the US. Convicted plotter Ahmed Ressaam has told the FBI that he conceived the idea to attack Los Angeles International Airport himself, but that Bin Ladin lieutenant Abu Zubaydah encouraged him and helped facilitate the operation. Ressaam also said that in 1998 Abu Zubaydah was planning his own US attack.

Ressaam says Bin Ladin was aware of the Los Angeles operation.

Although Bin Ladin has not succeeded, his attacks against the US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 demonstrate that he prepares operations years in advance and is not deterred by setbacks. Bin Ladin associates surveilled our Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam as early as 1993, and some members of the Nairobi cell planning the bombings were arrested and deported in 1997.

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. Two al-Qa’ da members found

guilty in the conspiracy to bomb our embassies in East Africa were US citizens, and a senior EIJ member lived in California in the mid-1990s.

A clandestine source said in 1998 that a Bin Ladin cell in New York was recruiting Muslim-American youth for attacks.

We have not been able to corroborate some of the more sensational threat reporting, such as that from a [—] service in 1998 saying that Bin Ladin wanted to hijack a US aircraft to gain the release of “Blind Shaykh” ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahman and other US-held extremists.

Nevertheless, FBI information since that time indicates patterns of suspicious activity in this country consistent with preparations for hijackings or other types of attacks, including recent surveillance of federal buildings in New York.

The FBI is conducting approximately 70 full field investigations throughout the US that it considers Bin Ladin-related. CIA and the FBI are investigating a call to our Embassy in the UAE in May saying that a group of Bin Ladin supporters was in the US planning attacks with explosives.

of buildings in New York, the threat phoned in to the embassy, or the fact that the FBI had approximately 70 ongoing bin Ladin-related investigations.³⁸ No CSG or other NSC meeting was held to discuss the possible threat of a strike in the United States as a result of this report.

Late in the month, a foreign service reported that Abu Zubaydah was considering mounting terrorist attacks in the United States, after postponing possible operations in Europe. No targets, timing, or method of attack were provided.³⁹

We have found no indication of any further discussion before September 11 among the President and his top advisers of the possibility of a threat of an al Qaeda attack in the United States. DCI Tenet visited President Bush in Crawford, Texas, on August 17 and participated in PDB briefings of the President between August 31 (after the President had returned to Washington) and September 10. But Tenet does not recall any discussions with the President of the domestic threat during this period.⁴⁰

Most of the intelligence community recognized in the summer of 2001 that the number and severity of threat reports were unprecedented. Many officials told us that they knew something terrible was planned, and they were desperate to stop it. Despite their large number, the threats received contained few

specifics regarding time, place, method, or target. Most suggested that attacks were planned against targets overseas; others indicated threats against unspecified “U.S. interests.” We cannot say for certain whether these reports, as dramatic as they were, related to the 9/11 attacks.

Government Response to the Threats

National Security Advisor Rice told us that the CSG was the “nerve center” for running the crisis, although other senior officials were involved over the course of the summer. In addition to his daily meetings with President Bush, and weekly meetings to go over other issues with Rice, Tenet was speaking regularly with Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. The foreign policy principals routinely talked on the telephone every day on a variety of topics.⁴¹

Hadley told us that before 9/11, he and Rice did not feel they had the job of coordinating domestic agencies. They felt that Clarke and the CSG (part of the NSC) were the NSC’s bridge between foreign and domestic threats.⁴²

There was a clear disparity in the levels of response to foreign versus domestic threats. Numerous actions were taken overseas to disrupt possible attacks—enlisting foreign partners to upset terrorist plans, closing embassies, moving military assets out of the way of possible harm. Far less was done domestically—in part, surely, because to the extent that specifics did exist, they pertained to threats overseas. As noted earlier, a threat against the embassy in Yemen quickly resulted in its closing. Possible domestic threats were more vague. When reports did not specify where the attacks were to take place, officials presumed that they would again be overseas, though they did not rule out a target in the United States. Each of the FBI threat advisories made this point.⁴³

Clarke mentioned to National Security Advisor Rice at least twice that al Qaeda sleeper cells were likely in the United States. In January 2001, Clarke forwarded a strategy paper to Rice warning that al Qaeda had a presence in the United States. He noted that two key al Qaeda members in the Jordanian cell involved in the millennium plot were naturalized U.S. citizens and that one jihadist suspected in the East Africa bombings had “informed the FBI that an extensive network of al Qida ‘sleeper agents’ currently exists in the US.” He added that Ressay’s abortive December 1999 attack revealed al Qaeda supporters in the United States.⁴⁴ His analysis, however, was based not on new threat reporting but on past experience.

The September 11 attacks fell into the void between the foreign and domestic threats. The foreign intelligence agencies were watching overseas, alert to foreign threats to U.S. interests there. The domestic agencies were waiting for evidence of a domestic threat from sleeper cells within the United States. No one was looking for a foreign threat to domestic targets. The threat that was coming was not from sleeper cells. It was foreign—but from foreigners who had infiltrated into the United States.

A second cause of this disparity in response is that domestic agencies did not know what to do, and no one gave them direction. Cressey told us that the CSG did not tell the agencies how to respond to the threats. He noted that the agencies that were operating overseas did not need direction on how to respond; they had experience with such threats and had a “playbook.” In contrast, the domestic agencies did not have a game plan. Neither the NSC (including the CSG) nor anyone else instructed them to create one.⁴⁵

This lack of direction was evident in the July 5 meeting with representatives from the domestic agencies. The briefing focused on overseas threats. The domestic agencies were not questioned about how they planned to address the threat and were not told what was expected of them. Indeed, as noted earlier, they were specifically told they could not issue advisories based on the briefing.⁴⁶ The domestic agencies’ limited response indicates that they did not perceive a call to action.

Clarke reflected a different perspective in an email to Rice on September 15, 2001. He summarized the steps taken by the CSG to alert domestic agencies to the possibility of an attack in the United States. Clarke concluded that domestic agencies, including the FAA, knew that the CSG believed a major al Qaeda attack was coming and could be in the United States.

Although the FAA had authority to issue security directives mandating new security procedures, none of the few that were released during the summer of 2001 increased security at checkpoints or on board aircraft. The information circulars mostly urged air carriers to “exercise prudence” and be alert. Prior to 9/11, the FAA did present a CD-ROM to air carriers and airport authorities describing the increased threat to civil aviation. The presentation mentioned the possibility of suicide hijackings but said that “fortunately, we have no indication that any group is currently thinking in that direction.”⁴⁷ The FAA conducted 27 special security briefings for specific air carriers between May 1, 2001, and September 11, 2001. Two of these briefings discussed the hijacking threat overseas. None discussed the possibility of suicide hijackings or the use of aircraft as weapons. No new security measures were instituted.⁴⁸

Rice told us she understood that the FBI had tasked its 56 U.S. field offices to increase surveillance of suspected terrorists and to reach out to informants who might have information about terrorist plots. An NSC staff document at the time describes such a tasking as having occurred in late June but does not indicate whether it was generated by the NSC or the FBI. Other than the previously described April 13 communication sent to all FBI field offices, however, the FBI could not find any record of having received such a directive. The April 13 document asking field offices to gather information on Sunni extremism did not mention any possible threat within the United States and did not order surveillance of suspected operatives. The NSC did not specify what the FBI’s directives should contain and did not review what had been issued earlier.⁴⁹

Acting FBI Director Pickard told us that in addition to his July 19 conference call, he mentioned the heightened terrorist threat in individual calls with the special agents in charge of field offices during their annual performance review discussions. In speaking with agents around the country, we found little evidence that any such concerns had reached FBI personnel beyond the New York Field Office.⁵⁰

The head of counterterrorism at the FBI, Dale Watson, said he had many discussions about possible attacks with Cofer Black at the CIA. They had expected an attack on July 4. Watson said he felt deeply that something was going to happen. But he told us the threat information was “nebulous.” He wished he had known more. He wished he had had “500 analysts looking at Usama Bin Ladin threat information instead of two.”⁵¹

Attorney General Ashcroft was briefed by the CIA in May and by Pickard in early July about the danger. Pickard said he met with Ashcroft once a week in late June, through July, and twice in August. There is a dispute regarding Ashcroft’s interest in Pickard’s briefings about the terrorist threat situation. Pickard told us that after two such briefings Ashcroft told him that he did not want to hear about the threats anymore. Ashcroft denies Pickard’s charge. Pickard says he continued to present terrorism information during further briefings that summer, but nothing further on the “chatter” the U.S. government was receiving.⁵²

The Attorney General told us he asked Pickard whether there was intelligence about attacks in the United States and that Pickard said no. Pickard said he replied that he could not assure Ashcroft that there would be no attacks in the United States, although the reports of threats were related to overseas targets. Ashcroft said he therefore assumed the FBI was doing what it needed to do. He acknowledged that in retrospect, this was a dangerous assumption. He did not ask the FBI what it was doing in response to the threats and did not task it to take any specific action. He also did not direct the INS, then still part of the Department of Justice, to take any specific action.⁵³

In sum, the domestic agencies never mobilized in response to the threat. They did not have direction, and did not have a plan to institute. The borders were not hardened. Transportation systems were not fortified. Electronic surveillance was not targeted against a domestic threat.⁵⁴ State and local law enforcement were not marshaled to augment the FBI’s efforts. The public was not warned.

The terrorists exploited deep institutional failings within our government. The question is whether extra vigilance might have turned up an opportunity to disrupt the plot. As seen in chapter 7, al Qaeda’s operatives made mistakes. At least two such mistakes created opportunities during 2001, especially in late August.

8.2 LATE LEADS—MIHDHAR, MOUSSAOUI, AND KSM

In chapter 6 we discussed how intelligence agencies successfully detected some of the early travel in the planes operation, picking up the movements of Khalid al Mihdhar and identifying him, and seeing his travel converge with someone they perhaps could have identified but did not—Nawaf al Hazmi—as well as with less easily identifiable people such as Khallad and Abu Bara. These observations occurred in December 1999 and January 2000. The trail had been lost in January 2000 without a clear realization that it had been lost, and without much effort to pick it up again. Nor had the CIA placed Mihdhar on the State Department's watchlist for suspected terrorists, so that either an embassy or a port of entry might take note if Mihdhar showed up again.

On four occasions in 2001, the CIA, the FBI, or both had apparent opportunities to refocus on the significance of Hazmi and Mihdhar and reinvigorate the search for them. After reviewing those episodes we will turn to the handling of the Moussaoui case and some late leads regarding Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

January 2001: Identification of Khallad

Almost one year after the original trail had been lost in Bangkok, the FBI and the CIA were working on the investigation of the *Cole* bombing. They learned of the link between a captured conspirator and a person called "Khallad." They also learned that Khallad was a senior security official for Bin Ladin who had helped direct the bombing (we introduced Khallad in chapter 5, and returned to his role in the *Cole* bombing in chapter 6).⁵⁵

One of the members of the FBI's investigative team in Yemen realized that he had heard of Khallad before, from a joint FBI/CIA source four months earlier. The FBI agent obtained from a foreign government a photo of the person believed to have directed the *Cole* bombing. It was shown to the source, and he confirmed that the man in that photograph was the same Khallad he had described.⁵⁶

In December 2000, on the basis of some links associated with Khalid al Mihdhar, the CIA's Bin Ladin unit speculated that Khallad and Khalid al Mihdhar might be one and the same.⁵⁷

The CIA asked that a Kuala Lumpur surveillance photo of Mihdhar be shown to the joint source who had identified Khallad. In early January 2001, two photographs from the Kuala Lumpur meeting were shown to the source. One was a known photograph of Mihdhar, the other a photograph of a then unknown subject. The source did not recognize Mihdhar. But he indicated he was 90 percent certain that the other individual was Khallad.⁵⁸

This meant that Khallad and Mihdhar were two different people. It also meant that there was a link between Khallad and Mihdhar, making Mihdhar seem even more suspicious.⁵⁹ Yet we found no effort by the CIA to renew the long-abandoned search for Mihdhar or his travel companions.

In addition, we found that the CIA did not notify the FBI of this identification. DCI Tenet and Cofer Black testified before Congress's Joint Inquiry into 9/11 that the FBI had access to this identification from the beginning. But drawing on an extensive record, including documents that were not available to the CIA personnel who drafted that testimony, we conclude this was not the case. The FBI's primary *Cole* investigators had no knowledge that Khallad had been in Kuala Lumpur with Mihdhar and others until after the September 11 attacks. Because the FBI had not been informed in January 2000 about Mihdhar's possession of a U.S. visa, it had not then started looking for him in the United States. Because it did not know of the links between Khallad and Mihdhar, it did not start looking for him in January 2001.⁶⁰

This incident is an example of how day-to-day gaps in information sharing can emerge even when there is mutual goodwill. The information was from a joint FBI/CIA source who spoke essentially no English and whose languages were not understood by the FBI agent on the scene overseas. Issues of travel and security necessarily kept short the amount of time spent with the source. As a result, the CIA officer usually did not translate either questions or answers for his FBI colleague and friend.⁶¹

For interviews without simultaneous translation, the FBI agent on the scene received copies of the reports that the CIA disseminated to other agencies regarding the interviews. But he was not given access to the CIA's internal operational reports, which contained more detail. It was there—in reporting to which FBI investigators did not have access—that information regarding the January 2001 identification of Khallad appeared. The CIA officer does not recall this particular identification and thus cannot say why it was not shared with his FBI colleague. He might not have understood the possible significance of the new identification.⁶²

In June 2000, Mihdhar left California and returned to Yemen. It is possible that if, in January 2001, the CIA had resumed its search for him, placed him on the State Department's TIPOFF watchlist, or provided the FBI with the information, he might have been found—either before or at the time he applied for a new visa in June 2001, or when he returned to the United States on July 4.

Spring 2001: Looking Again at Kuala Lumpur

By mid-May 2001, as the threat reports were surging, a CIA official detailed to the International Terrorism Operations Section at the FBI wondered where the attacks might occur. We will call him “John.” Recalling the episode about the Kuala Lumpur travel of Mihdhar and his associates, “John” searched the CIA's databases for information regarding the travel. On May 15, he and an official at the CIA reexamined many of the old cables from early 2000, including the information that Mihdhar had a U.S. visa, and that Hazmi had come to Los Angeles on January 15, 2000.⁶³

The CIA official who reviewed the cables took no action regarding them.

“John,” however, began a lengthy exchange with a CIA analyst, whom we will call “Dave,” to figure out what these cables meant. “John” was aware of how dangerous Khallad was—at one point calling him a “major league killer.” He concluded that “something bad was definitely up.” Despite the U.S. links evident in this traffic, “John” made no effort to determine whether any of these individuals was in the United States. He did not raise that possibility with his FBI counterpart. He was focused on Malaysia.⁶⁴

“John” described the CIA as an agency that tended to play a “zone defense.” He was worrying solely about Southeast Asia, not the United States. In contrast, he told us, the FBI tends to play “man-to-man.”⁶⁵

Desk officers at the CIA’s Bin Ladin unit did not have “cases” in the same sense as an FBI agent who works an investigation from beginning to end. Thus, when the trail went cold after the Kuala Lumpur meeting in January 2000, the desk officer moved on to different things. By the time the March 2000 cable arrived with information that one of the travelers had flown to Los Angeles, the case officer was no longer responsible for follow-up. While several individuals at the Bin Ladin unit opened the cable when it arrived in March 2000, no action was taken.⁶⁶

The CIA’s zone defense concentrated on “where,” not “who.” Had its information been shared with the FBI, a combination of the CIA’s zone defense and the FBI’s man-to-man approach might have been productive.

June 2001: The Meeting in New York

“John’s” review of the Kuala Lumpur meeting did set off some more sharing of information, getting the attention of an FBI analyst whom we will call “Jane.” “Jane” was assigned to the FBI’s *Cole* investigation. She knew that another terrorist involved in that operation, Fahd al Quso, had traveled to Bangkok in January 2000 to give money to Khallad.⁶⁷

“Jane” and the CIA analyst, “Dave,” had been working together on *Cole*-related issues. Chasing Quso’s trail, “Dave” suggested showing some photographs to FBI agents in New York who were working on the *Cole* case and had interviewed Quso.⁶⁸

“John” gave three Kuala Lumpur surveillance pictures to “Jane” to show to the New York agents. She was told that one of the individuals in the photographs was someone named Khalid al Mihdhar. She did not know why the photographs had been taken or why the Kuala Lumpur travel might be significant, and she was not told that someone had identified Khallad in the photographs. When “Jane” did some research in a database for intelligence reports, Intelink, she found the original NSA reports on the planning for the meeting. Because the CIA had not disseminated reports on its tracking of Mihdhar, “Jane” did not pull up any information about Mihdhar’s U.S. visa or about travel to the United States by Hazmi or Mihdhar.⁶⁹

“Jane,” “Dave,” and an FBI analyst who was on detail to the CIA’s Bin Ladin

unit went to New York on June 11 to meet with the agents about the *Cole* case. “Jane” brought the surveillance pictures. At some point in the meeting she showed the photographs to the agents and asked whether they recognized Quso in any of them. The agents asked questions about the photographs—Why were they taken? Why were these people being followed? Where are the rest of the photographs?⁷⁰

The only information “Jane” had about the meeting—other than the photographs—were the NSA reports that she had found on Intelink. These reports, however, contained caveats that their contents could not be shared with criminal investigators without the permission of the Justice Department’s Office of Intelligence Policy and Review (OIPR). Therefore “Jane” concluded that she could not pass on information from those reports to the agents. This decision was potentially significant, because the signals intelligence she did not share linked Mihdhar to a suspected terrorist facility in the Middle East. The agents would have established a link to the suspected facility from their work on the embassy bombings case. This link would have made them very interested in learning more about Mihdhar.⁷¹ The sad irony is that the agents who found the source were being kept from obtaining the fruits of their own work.

“Dave,” the CIA analyst, knew more about the Kuala Lumpur meeting. He knew that Mihdhar possessed a U.S. visa, that his visa application indicated that he intended to travel to New York, that Hazmi had traveled to Los Angeles, and that a source had put Mihdhar in the company of Khallad. No one at the meeting asked him what he knew; he did not volunteer anything. He told investigators that as a CIA analyst, he was not authorized to answer FBI questions regarding CIA information. “Jane” said she assumed that if “Dave” knew the answers to questions, he would have volunteered them. The New York agents left the meeting without obtaining information that might have started them looking for Mihdhar.⁷²

Mihdhar had been a weak link in al Qaeda’s operational planning. He had left the United States in June 2000, a mistake KSM realized could endanger the entire plan—for to continue with the operation, Mihdhar would have to travel to the United States again. And unlike other operatives, Mihdhar was not “clean”: he had jihadist connections. It was just such connections that had brought him to the attention of U.S. officials.

Nevertheless, in this case KSM’s fears were not realized. Mihdhar received a new U.S. visa two days after the CIA-FBI meeting in New York. He flew to New York City on July 4. No one was looking for him.

August 2001: The Search for Mihdhar and Hazmi Begins and Fails

During the summer of 2001 “John,” following a good instinct but not as part of any formal assignment, asked “Mary,” an FBI analyst detailed to the CIA’s Bin Ladin unit, to review all the Kuala Lumpur materials one more time. She had been at the New York meeting with “Jane” and “Dave” but had not

looked into the issues yet herself. “John” asked her to do the research in her free time.⁷³

“Mary” began her work on July 24. That day, she found the cable reporting that Mihdhar had a visa to the United States. A week later, she found the cable reporting that Mihdhar’s visa application—what was later discovered to be his first application—listed New York as his destination. On August 21, she located the March 2000 cable that “noted with interest” that Hazmi had flown to Los Angeles in January 2000. She immediately grasped the significance of this information.⁷⁴

“Mary” and “Jane” promptly met with an INS representative at FBI headquarters. On August 22, the INS told them that Mihdhar had entered the United States on January 15, 2000, and again on July 4, 2001. “Jane” and “Mary” also learned that there was no record that Hazmi had left the country since January 2000, and they assumed he had left with Mihdhar in June 2000. They decided that if Mihdhar was in the United States, he should be found.⁷⁵

They divided up the work. “Mary” asked the Bin Ladin unit to draft a cable requesting that Mihdhar and Hazmi be put on the TIPOFF watchlist. Both Hazmi and Mihdhar were added to this watchlist on August 24.⁷⁶

“Jane” took responsibility for the search effort inside the United States. As the information indicated that Mihdhar had last arrived in New York, she began drafting what is known as a lead for the FBI’s New York Field Office. A lead relays information from one part of the FBI to another and requests that a particular action be taken. She called an agent in New York to give him a “heads-up” on the matter, but her draft lead was not sent until August 28. Her email told the New York agent that she wanted him to get started as soon as possible, but she labeled the lead as “Routine”—a designation that informs the receiving office that it has 30 days to respond.⁷⁷

The agent who received the lead forwarded it to his squad supervisor. That same day, the supervisor forwarded the lead to an intelligence agent to open an intelligence case—an agent who thus was behind “the wall” keeping FBI intelligence information from being shared with criminal prosecutors. He also sent it to the *Cole* case agents and an agent who had spent significant time in Malaysia searching for another Khalid: Khalid Sheikh Mohammad.⁷⁸

The suggested goal of the investigation was to locate Mihdhar, determine his contacts and reasons for being in the United States, and possibly conduct an interview. Before sending the lead, “Jane” had discussed it with “John,” the CIA official on detail to the FBI. She had also checked with the acting head of the FBI’s Bin Ladin unit. The discussion seems to have been limited to whether the search should be classified as an intelligence investigation or as a criminal one. It appears that no one informed higher levels of management in either the FBI or CIA about the case.⁷⁹ There is no evidence that the lead, or the search for these terrorist suspects, was substantively discussed at any level

above deputy chief of a section within the Counterterrorism Division at FBI headquarters.

One of the *Cole* case agents read the lead with interest, and contacted “Jane” to obtain more information. “Jane” argued, however, that because the agent was designated a “criminal” FBI agent, not an intelligence FBI agent, the wall kept him from participating in any search for Mihdhar. In fact, she felt he had to destroy his copy of the lead because it contained NSA information from reports that included caveats ordering that the information not be shared without OIPR’s permission. The agent asked “Jane” to get an opinion from the FBI’s National Security Law Unit (NSLU) on whether he could open a criminal case on Mihdhar.⁸⁰

“Jane” sent an email to the *Cole* case agent explaining that according to the NSLU, the case could be opened only as an intelligence matter, and that if Mihdhar was found, only designated intelligence agents could conduct or even be present at any interview. She appears to have misunderstood the complex rules that could apply to this situation.⁸¹

The FBI agent angrily responded:

Whatever has happened to this—someday someone will die—and wall or not—the public will not understand why we were not more effective and throwing every resource we had at certain “problems.”

Let’s hope the National Security Law Unit will stand behind their decisions then, especially since the biggest threat to us now, UBL, is getting the most “protection.”

“Jane” replied that she was not making up the rules; she claimed that they were in the relevant manual and “ordered by the [FISA] Court and every office of the FBI is required to follow them including FBI NY.”⁸²

It is now clear that everyone involved was confused about the rules governing the sharing and use of information gathered in intelligence channels. Because Mihdhar was being sought for his possible connection to or knowledge of the *Cole* bombing, he could be investigated or tracked under the existing *Cole* criminal case. No new criminal case was needed for the criminal agent to begin searching for Mihdhar. And as NSA had approved the passage of its information to the criminal agent, he could have conducted a search using all available information. As a result of this confusion, the criminal agents who were knowledgeable about al Qaeda and experienced with criminal investigative techniques, including finding suspects and possible criminal charges, were thus excluded from the search.⁸³

The search was assigned to one FBI agent, and it was his very first counterterrorism lead. Because the lead was “routine,” he was given 30 days to open an intelligence case and make some unspecified efforts to locate Mihdhar. He started the process a few days later. He checked local New York databases for

criminal record and driver's license information and checked the hotel listed on Mihdhar's U.S. entry form. Finally, on September 11, the agent sent a lead to Los Angeles, because Mihdhar had initially arrived in Los Angeles in January 2000.⁸⁴

We believe that if more resources had been applied and a significantly different approach taken, Mihdhar and Hazmi might have been found. They had used their true names in the United States. Still, the investigators would have needed luck as well as skill to find them prior to September 11 even if such searches had begun as early as August 23, when the lead was first drafted.⁸⁵

Many FBI witnesses have suggested that even if Mihdhar had been found, there was nothing the agents could have done except follow him onto the planes. We believe this is incorrect. Both Hazmi and Mihdhar could have been held for immigration violations or as material witnesses in the *Cole* bombing case. Investigation or interrogation of them, and investigation of their travel and financial activities, could have yielded evidence of connections to other participants in the 9/11 plot. The simple fact of their detention could have derailed the plan. In any case, the opportunity did not arise.

Phoenix Memo

The Phoenix memo was investigated thoroughly by the Joint Inquiry and the Department of Justice Inspector General.⁸⁶ We will recap it briefly here. In July 2001, an FBI agent in the Phoenix field office sent a memo to FBI headquarters and to two agents on international terrorism squads in the New York Field Office, advising of the "possibility of a coordinated effort by Usama Bin Ladin" to send students to the United States to attend civil aviation schools. The agent based his theory on the "inordinate number of individuals of investigative interest" attending such schools in Arizona.⁸⁷

The agent made four recommendations to FBI headquarters: to compile a list of civil aviation schools, establish liaison with those schools, discuss his theories about Bin Ladin with the intelligence community, and seek authority to obtain visa information on persons applying to flight schools. His recommendations were not acted on. His memo was forwarded to one field office. Managers of the Usama Bin Ladin unit and the Radical Fundamentalist unit at FBI headquarters were addressees, but they did not even see the memo until after September 11. No managers at headquarters saw the memo before September 11, and the New York Field Office took no action.⁸⁸

As its author told investigators, the Phoenix memo was not an alert about suicide pilots. His worry was more about a Pan Am Flight 103 scenario in which explosives were placed on an aircraft. The memo's references to aviation training were broad, including aeronautical engineering.⁸⁹ If the memo had been distributed in a timely fashion and its recommendations acted on promptly, we do not believe it would have uncovered the plot. It might well, however, have sensitized the FBI so that it might have taken the Moussaoui matter more seriously the next month.

Zacarias Moussaoui

On August 15, 2001, the Minneapolis FBI Field Office initiated an intelligence investigation on Zacarias Moussaoui. As mentioned in chapter 7, he had entered the United States in February 2001, and had begun flight lessons at Airman Flight School in Norman, Oklahoma. He resumed his training at the Pan Am International Flight Academy in Eagan, Minnesota, starting on August 13. He had none of the usual qualifications for flight training on Pan Am's Boeing 747 flight simulators. He said he did not intend to become a commercial pilot but wanted the training as an “ego boosting thing.” Moussaoui stood out because, with little knowledge of flying, he wanted to learn how to “take off and land” a Boeing 747.⁹⁰

The agent in Minneapolis quickly learned that Moussaoui possessed jihadist beliefs. Moreover, Moussaoui had \$32,000 in a bank account but did not provide a plausible explanation for this sum of money. He had traveled to Pakistan but became agitated when asked if he had traveled to nearby countries while in Pakistan (Pakistan was the customary route to the training camps in Afghanistan). He planned to receive martial arts training, and intended to purchase a global positioning receiver. The agent also noted that Moussaoui became extremely agitated whenever he was questioned regarding his religious beliefs. The agent concluded that Moussaoui was “an Islamic extremist preparing for some future act in furtherance of radical fundamentalist goals.” He also believed Moussaoui's plan was related to his flight training.⁹¹

Moussaoui can be seen as an al Qaeda mistake and a missed opportunity. An apparently unreliable operative, he had fallen into the hands of the FBI. As discussed in chapter 7, Moussaoui had been in contact with and received money from Ramzi Binalshibh. If Moussaoui had been connected to al Qaeda, questions should instantly have arisen about a possible al Qaeda plot that involved piloting airliners, a possibility that had never been seriously analyzed by the intelligence community.

The FBI agent who handled the case in conjunction with the INS representative on the Minneapolis Joint Terrorism Task Force suspected that Moussaoui might be planning to hijack a plane. Minneapolis and FBI headquarters debated whether Moussaoui should be arrested immediately or surveilled to obtain additional information. Because it was not clear whether Moussaoui could be imprisoned, the FBI case agent decided the most important thing was to prevent Moussaoui from obtaining any further training that he could use to carry out a potential attack.⁹²

As a French national who had overstayed his visa, Moussaoui could be detained immediately. The INS arrested Moussaoui on the immigration violation. A deportation order was signed on August 17, 2001.⁹³

The agents in Minnesota were concerned that the U.S. Attorney's Office in Minneapolis would find insufficient probable cause of a crime to obtain a criminal warrant to search Moussaoui's laptop computer.⁹⁴ Agents at FBI headquarters believed there was insufficient probable cause. Minneapolis therefore

sought a special warrant under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act to conduct the search (we introduced FISA in chapter 3).

To do so, however, the FBI needed to demonstrate probable cause that Moussaoui was an agent of a foreign power, a demonstration that was not required to obtain a criminal warrant but was a statutory requirement for a FISA warrant.⁹⁵ The case agent did not have sufficient information to connect Moussaoui to a “foreign power,” so he reached out for help, in the United States and overseas.

The FBI agent’s August 18 message requested assistance from the FBI legal attaché in Paris. Moussaoui had lived in London, so the Minneapolis agent sought assistance from the legal attaché there as well. By August 24, the Minneapolis agent had also contacted an FBI detailee and a CIA desk officer at the Counterterrorist Center about the case.⁹⁶

The FBI legal attaché’s office in Paris first contacted the French government on August 16 or 17, shortly after speaking to the Minneapolis case agent on the telephone. On August 22 and 27, the French provided information that made a connection between Moussaoui and a rebel leader in Chechnya, Ibn al Khattab. This set off a spirited debate between the Minneapolis Field Office, FBI headquarters, and the CIA as to whether the Chechen rebels and Khattab were sufficiently associated with a terrorist organization to constitute a “foreign power” for purposes of the FISA statute. FBI headquarters did not believe this was good enough, and its National Security Law Unit declined to submit a FISA application.⁹⁷

After receiving the written request for assistance, the legal attaché in London had promptly forwarded it to his counterparts in the British government, hand-delivering the request on August 21. On August 24, the CIA also sent a cable to London and Paris regarding “subjects involved in suspicious 747 flight training” that described Moussaoui as a possible “suicide hijacker.” On August 28, the CIA sent a request for information to a different service of the British government; this communication warned that Moussaoui might be expelled to Britain by the end of August. The FBI office in London raised the matter briefly with British officials as an aside, after a meeting about a more urgent matter on September 3, and sent the British service a written update on September 5. The case was not handled by the British as a priority amid a large number of other terrorist-related inquiries.⁹⁸

On September 4, the FBI sent a teletype to the CIA, the FAA, the Customs Service, the State Department, the INS, and the Secret Service summarizing the known facts regarding Moussaoui. It did not report the case agent’s personal assessment that Moussaoui planned to hijack an airplane. It did contain the FAA’s comment that it was not unusual for Middle Easterners to attend flight training schools in the United States.⁹⁹

Although the Minneapolis agents wanted to tell the FAA from the beginning about Moussaoui, FBI headquarters instructed Minneapolis that it could

not share the more complete report the case agent had prepared for the FAA. The Minneapolis supervisor sent the case agent in person to the local FAA office to fill in what he thought were gaps in the FBI headquarters teletype.¹⁰⁰ No FAA actions seem to have been taken in response.

There was substantial disagreement between Minneapolis agents and FBI headquarters as to what Moussaoui was planning to do. In one conversation between a Minneapolis supervisor and a headquarters agent, the latter complained that Minneapolis’s FISA request was couched in a manner intended to get people “spun up.” The supervisor replied that was precisely his intent. He said he was “trying to keep someone from taking a plane and crashing into the World Trade Center.” The headquarters agent replied that this was not going to happen and that they did not know if Moussaoui was a terrorist.¹⁰¹

There is no evidence that either FBI Acting Director Pickard or Assistant Director for Counterterrorism Dale Watson was briefed on the Moussaoui case prior to 9/11. Michael Rolince, the FBI assistant director heading the Bureau’s International Terrorism Operations Section (ITOS), recalled being told about Moussaoui in two passing hallway conversations but only in the context that he might be receiving telephone calls from Minneapolis complaining about how headquarters was handling the matter. He never received such a call. Although the acting special agent in charge of Minneapolis called the ITOS supervisors to discuss the Moussaoui case on August 27, he declined to go up the chain of command at FBI headquarters and call Rolince.¹⁰²

On August 23, DCI Tenet was briefed about the Moussaoui case in a briefing titled “Islamic Extremist Learns to Fly.”¹⁰³ Tenet was also told that Moussaoui wanted to learn to fly a 747, paid for his training in cash, was interested to learn the doors do not open in flight, and wanted to fly a simulated flight from London to New York. He was told that the FBI had arrested Moussaoui because of a visa overstay and that the CIA was working the case with the FBI. Tenet told us that no connection to al Qaeda was apparent to him at the time. Seeing it as an FBI case, he did not discuss the matter with anyone at the White House or the FBI. No connection was made between Moussaoui’s presence in the United States and the threat reporting during the summer of 2001.¹⁰⁴

On September 11, after the attacks, the FBI office in London renewed their appeal for information about Moussaoui. In response to U.S. requests, the British government supplied some basic biographical information about Moussaoui. The British government informed us that it also immediately tasked intelligence collection facilities for information about Moussaoui. On September 13, the British government received new, sensitive intelligence that Moussaoui had attended an al Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan. It passed this intelligence to the United States on the same day. Had this information been available in late August 2001, the Moussaoui case would almost certainly have received intense, high-level attention.¹⁰⁵

The FBI also learned after 9/11 that the millennium terrorist Ressaam, who

by 2001 was cooperating with investigators, recognized Moussaoui as someone who had been in the Afghan camps.¹⁰⁶ As mentioned above, before 9/11 the FBI agents in Minneapolis had failed to persuade supervisors at headquarters that there was enough evidence to seek a FISA warrant to search Moussaoui's computer hard drive and belongings. Either the British information or the Ressaym identification would have broken the logjam.

A maximum U.S. effort to investigate Moussaoui conceivably could have unearthed his connections to Binalshibh. Those connections might have brought investigators to the core of the 9/11 plot. The Binalshibh connection was recognized shortly after 9/11, though it was not an easy trail to find. Discovering it would have required quick and very substantial cooperation from the German government, which might well have been difficult to obtain.

However, publicity about Moussaoui's arrest and a possible hijacking threat might have derailed the plot.¹⁰⁷ With time, the search for Mihdhar and Hazmi and the investigation of Moussaoui might also have led to a breakthrough that would have disrupted the plot.

Khalid Sheikh Mohammed

Another late opportunity was presented by a confluence of information regarding Khalid Sheikh Mohammed received by the intelligence community in the summer of 2001. The possible links between KSM, Moussaoui, and an individual only later identified as Ramzi Binalshibh would remain undiscovered, however.

Although we readily equate KSM with al Qaeda today, this was not the case before 9/11. KSM, who had been indicted in January 1996 for his role in the Manila air plot, was seen primarily as another freelance terrorist, associated with Ramzi Yousef. Because the links between KSM and Bin Ladin or al Qaeda were not recognized at the time, responsibility for KSM remained in the small Islamic Extremist Branch of the Counterterrorist Center, not in the Bin Ladin unit.

Moreover, because KSM had already been indicted, he became targeted for arrest. In 1997, the Counterterrorist Center added a Renditions Branch to help find wanted fugitives. Responsibility for KSM was transferred to this branch, which gave the CIA a "man-to-man" focus but was not an analytical unit. When subsequent information came, more critical for analysis than for tracking, no unit had the job of following up on what the information might mean.¹⁰⁸

For example, in September 2000, a source had reported that an individual named Khalid al-Shaykh al-Ballushi was a key lieutenant in al Qaeda. Al-Ballushi means "from Baluchistan," and KSM is from Baluchistan. Recognizing the possible significance of this information, the Bin Ladin unit sought more information. When no information was forthcoming, the Bin Ladin unit

dropped the matter.¹⁰⁹ When additional pieces of the puzzle arrived in the spring and summer of 2001, they were not put together.

The first piece of the puzzle concerned some intriguing information associated with a person known as “Mukhtar” that the CIA had begun analyzing in April 2001. The CIA did not know who Mukhtar was at the time—only that he associated with al Qaeda lieutenant Abu Zubaydah and that, based on the nature of the information, he was evidently involved in planning possible terrorist activities.¹¹⁰

The second piece of the puzzle was some alarming information regarding KSM. On June 12, 2001, a CIA report said that “Khaled” was actively recruiting people to travel outside Afghanistan, including to the United States where colleagues were reportedly already in the country to meet them, to carry out terrorist-related activities for Bin Ladin. CIA headquarters presumed from the details of the reporting that this person was Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. In July, the same source was shown a series of photographs and identified a photograph of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed as the Khaled he had previously discussed.¹¹¹

The final piece of the puzzle arrived at the CIA’s Bin Ladin unit on August 28 in a cable reporting that KSM’s nickname was Mukhtar. No one made the connection to the reports about Mukhtar that had been circulated in the spring. This connection might also have underscored concern about the June reporting that KSM was recruiting terrorists to travel, including to the United States. Only after 9/11 would it be discovered that Mukhtar/KSM had communicated with a phone that was used by Binalshibh, and that Binalshibh had used the same phone to communicate with Moussaoui, as discussed in chapter 7. As in the Moussaoui situation already described, the links to Binalshibh might not have been an easy trail to find and would have required substantial cooperation from the German government. But time was short, and running out.¹¹²

Time Runs Out

As Tenet told us, “the system was blinking red” during the summer of 2001. Officials were alerted across the world. Many were doing everything they possibly could to respond to the threats.

Yet no one working on these late leads in the summer of 2001 connected the case in his or her in-box to the threat reports agitating senior officials and being briefed to the President. Thus, these individual cases did not become national priorities. As the CIA supervisor “John” told us, no one looked at the bigger picture; no analytic work foresaw the lightning that could connect the thundercloud to the ground.¹¹³

We see little evidence that the progress of the plot was disturbed by any government action. The U.S. government was unable to capitalize on mistakes made by al Qaeda. Time ran out.