

American Intelligence and the Attacks of September 11th

“It was an intelligence debacle, a colossal failure of intelligence.”¹

Sen. Richard Shelby of Alabama

“It is a lamentably common practice in Washington and elsewhere to shoot people in the back and then complain when they fail to win the race. The loss of so many lives in New York and Washington is now called an ‘intelligence failure,’ mostly by those who crippled the CIA in the first place and by those who celebrated the loss of its invaluable capabilities.”²

Tom Clancy, Novelist

“There is no such thing as 100 percent intelligence, particularly in the field of counterterrorism. What you get are snippets of intelligence, which you have to piece together. You are very lucky if you get intelligence about when, where and how.”³

Stella Rimington, former head of
Britain’s MI5 Security Service

Past Is Prologue

“What did the government know, and when did it know it,” has become a familiar refrain to Americans seeking accountability from their government in any number of scandals, tragedies and foreign policy “events” of the post-Nixon era. The deepening skepticism and cynicism of the public in general and the elites of the Fourth Estate towards the government and its intelligence and other agencies manifested itself within days of the September 11th attacks. Many Americans wondered how, with an intelligence budget of no less than \$30 billion dollars per year, the United States was unable to detect and prevent the September 11th attacks. Indeed, seeking to deflect blame and the concomitant political fallout, Bush-Cheney administration and Congressional officials claimed to have no clue in advance about the tragedy.

Senator Dick Lugar, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the Select Intelligence Committee, was commenting within

a week of the attacks that, "There certainly were no (warning signs) available to the members of the intelligence committee, I attend the meetings regularly and there were no indicators."⁴

But were there? In February 2000, Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) George Tenet provided the following testimony before the Senate intelligence Committee:

Osama bin Laden and his global network of lieutenants and associates remain the most immediate and serious threat. His organization is continuing to place emphasis on developing surrogates to carry out attacks in an effort to avoid detection, blame and retaliation.

One year earlier, in 1999, Tenet testified in the same forum that:

Osama bin Laden is still foremost among these terrorists, because of the immediacy and seriousness of the threat he poses. Everything we have learned recently confirms our conviction that he wants to strike further blows against America. Despite some well-publicized disruptions, we believe he could still strike without additional warning.

Placed in the context of the serial bombing campaign begun in 1995 against U.S. facilities in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 1996 at the "Khobar Towers," our embassies in East Africa (August 1998) and the USS Cole (October 12, 2000) was there a true intelligence failure, or was there an unrealistic attitude of continental invulnerability and a near total void in planning what is now known as "Homeland Security?" Perhaps both existed.

Taking things a step further, one must ask if the American public was even remotely concerned with terrorism before September 11th. Terrorism issues or policy questions did not factor much in the 2000 general election. With few exceptions, the press did not aggressively pursue terrorism stories. The last decade of bombings against American interests should have served as an explicit and dire warning of things to come, yet were seen as unfortunate, isolated incidents. On September 9, 2001,

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld threatened a presidential veto if Congress shifted \$600 million from ballistic missile defense systems to counterterrorism programs. Attorney General John Ashcroft's Justice Department budget submission of September 10, 2001, increased funding in 68 law enforcement programs – none dealt with counterterrorism.⁵ The American people, their government and its intelligence agencies were asleep at the switch – period.

Beginning May 16, 2002, the Washington press corps, some members of Congress, and others were whipped into a furor over The White House's disclosure that President Bush was cautioned last August that Osama bin Laden might be planning a hijacking. The response to the disclosure has been characterized as politically motivated opportunism; bureaucratic finger-pointing; anti-Bush press sensationalism; an exercise in 20/20 hindsight; and by some, as a legitimate quest to uncover the important background facts that accurately depict the state of affairs within our government. In a televised damage control effort on May 16, 2002, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice said the government had received numerous reports of terrorist threats last summer, and emphasized that the information seemed general and pointed toward potential attacks overseas. On May 17, 2002, President Bush defended himself against critics' suggestions that he ignored warning signs of the September 11th attacks, saying "I would have done everything in my power to protect the American people" had he known of Osama bin Laden's plans.⁶

In fact, the information President Bush received in the August 6, 2001, briefing had been public for months. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) published a report called "Criminal Acts Against Aviation" on its Internet site in 2001 (before the hijackings) that warned that although Osama bin Laden "is not known to have attacked civil aviation, he has both the motivation and the wherewithal to do so." The report added, "Bin Laden's anti-Western and anti-American attitudes make him and his followers a significant threat to civil aviation, particularly to U.S. civil aviation." Both American Airlines and United Airlines, which each lost two planes on September 11th, acknowledged receiving Federal FAA alerts and periodic security information bulletins, but no specific warning of a hijacking threat.⁷

What became "news" and stoked the political controversy over the intelligence failure was the inability of The White House to explain why it took eight months to reveal that the CIA had raised the specific possibility of a hijacking by al Qaeda, even in conventional terms, that were not specific or predictive of the nature of the September 11th attacks.⁸