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WHAT WENT WRONG

The C.I.A. and the failure of American intelligence.

BY SEYMOUR M. HERSH

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After more than two weeks of around-the-clock investigation into the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the American intelligence community remains confused, divided, and unsure about how the terrorists operated, how many there were, and what they might do next. It was that lack of solid information, government officials told me, that was the key factor behind the Bush Administration's decision last week not to issue a promised white paper listing the evidence linking Osama bin Laden's organization to the attacks.

There is consensus within the government on two issues: the terrorist attacks were brilliantly planned and executed, and the intelligence community was in no way prepared to stop them. One bureaucratic victim, the officials said, may be George Tenet, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, whose resignation is considered a necessity by many in the Administration. "The system is after Tenet," one senior officer told me. "It wants to get rid of him."

The investigators are now split into at least two factions. One, centered in the F.B.I., believes that the terrorists may not have been "a cohesive group," as one involved official put it, before they started training and working together on this operation. "These guys look like a pickup basketball team," he said. "A bunch of guys who got together." The F.B.I. is still trying to sort out the identities and backgrounds of the hijackers. The fact is, the official acknowledged, "we don't know much about them."

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These investigators suspect that the suicide teams were simply lucky. “In your wildest dreams, do you think they thought they’d be able to pull off four hijackings?” the official asked. “Just taking out one jet and getting it into the ground would have been a success. These are not supermen.” He explained that the most important advantage the hijackers had, aside from the element of surprise, was history: in the past, most hijackings had ended up safely on the ground at a Third World airport, so pilots had been trained to cooperate.

Another view, centered in the Pentagon and the C.I.A., credits the hijackers with years of advance planning and practice, and a deliberate after-the-fact disinformation campaign. “These guys were below everybody’s radar—they’re professionals,” an official said. “There’s no more than five or six in a cell. Three men will know the plan; three won’t know. They’ve been ‘sleeping’ out there for years and years.” One military planner told me that many of his colleagues believe that the terrorists “went to ground and pulled phone lines” well before September 11th—that is, concealed traces of their activities. It is widely believed that the terrorists had a support team, and the fact that the F.B.I. has been unable to track down fellow-conspirators who were left behind in the United States is seen as further evidence of careful planning. “Look,” one person familiar with the investigation said. “If it were as simple and straightforward as a lucky one-off oddball operation, then the seeds of confusion would not have been sown as they were.”

Many of the investigators believe that some of the initial clues that were uncovered about the terrorists’ identities and preparations, such as flight manuals, were meant to be found. A former high-level intelligence official told me, “Whatever trail was left was left deliberately—for the F.B.I. to chase.”

In interviews over the past two weeks, a number of intelligence officials have raised questions about Osama bin Laden’s capabilities. “This guy sits in a cave in Afghanistan and he’s running this operation?” one C.I.A. official asked. “It’s so huge. He couldn’t have done it alone.” A senior military officer told me that because of the visas and other documentation needed to infiltrate team members into the United States a major foreign intelligence service might also have been involved. “To get somebody to fly an airplane—to kill himself,” the official added, further suggests that “somebody paid his family a hell of a lot of money.”

“These people are not necessarily all from bin Laden,” a Justice Department official told me. “We’re still running a lot of stuff out,” he said, adding that the F.B.I. has been inundated with leads. On September 23rd, Secretary of State Colin Powell told a television interviewer that “we will put before the world, the American people, a persuasive case” showing that bin Laden was responsible for the attacks.

But the widely anticipated white paper could not be published, the Justice Department official said, for lack of hard facts. “There was not enough to make a sale.”

The Administration justified the delay by telling the press that most of the information was classified and could not yet be released. Last week, however, a senior C.I.A. official confirmed that the intelligence community had not yet developed a significant amount of solid information about the terrorists’ operations, financing, and planning. “One day, we’ll know, but at the moment we don’t know,” the official said.

”To me,” he added, “the scariest thing is that these guys”—the terrorists—”got the first one free. They knew that the standard operating procedure in an aircraft hijacking was to play for time. And they knew for sure that after this the security on airplanes was going to go way up. So whatever they’ve planned for the next round they had in place already.”

The concern about a second attack was repeated by others involved in the investigation. Some in the F.B.I. now suspect that the terrorists are following a war plan devised by the convicted conspirator Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, who is believed to have been the mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Yousef was involved in plans that called for, among other things, the releasing of poisons in the air and the bombing of the tunnels between New York City and New Jersey. The government’s concern about the potential threat from hazardous-waste haulers was heightened by the Yousef case.

”Do they go chem/bio in one, two, or three years?” one senior general asked rhetorically. “We must now make a difficult transition from reliance on law enforcement to the preëmptive. That part is hard. Can we recruit enough good people?” In recent years, he said, “we’ve been hiring kids out of college who are computer geeks.” He continued, “This is about going back to deep, hard dirty work, with tough people going down dark alleys with good instincts.”

Today’s C.I.A. is not up to the job. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, in 1991, the C.I.A. has become increasingly bureaucratic and unwilling to take risks, and has promoted officers who shared such values. (“The consciousness of kind,” one former officer says.) It has steadily reduced its reliance on overseas human intelligence and cut the number of case officers abroad—members of the clandestine service, now known formally as the Directorate of Operations, or D.O., whose mission is to recruit spies. (It used to be called the “dirty tricks” department.) Instead, the agency has relied on liaison relationships—reports from friendly intelligence services and police departments around the world—and on technical collection systems.

It won't be easy to put agents back in the field. During the Cold War, the agency's most important mission was to recruit spies from within the Soviet Union's military and its diplomatic corps. C.I.A. agents were assigned as diplomatic or cultural officers at American embassies in major cities, and much of their work could be done at diplomatic functions and other social events. For an agent with such cover, the consequence of being exposed was usually nothing more than expulsion from the host country and temporary reassignment to a desk in Washington. Today, in Afghanistan, or anywhere in the Middle East or South Asia, a C.I.A. operative would have to speak the local language and be able to blend in. The operative should seemingly have nothing to do with any Americans, or with the American embassy, if there is one. The status is known inside the agency as "nonofficial cover," or NOC. Exposure could mean death.

It's possible that there isn't a single such officer operating today inside Islamic-fundamentalist circles. In an essay published last summer in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Reuel Marc Gerecht, who served for nearly a decade as a case officer in the C.I.A.'s Near East Division, quoted one C.I.A. man as saying, "For Christ's sake, most case officers live in the suburbs of Virginia. We don't do that kind of thing." Another officer told Gerecht, "Operations that include diarrhea as a way of life don't happen."

At the same time, the D.O. has been badly hurt by a series of resignations and retirements among high-level people, including four men whose names are little known to the public but who were widely respected throughout the agency: Douglas Smith, who spent thirty-one years in the clandestine service; William Lofgren, who at his retirement, in 1996, was chief of the Central Eurasia Division; David Manners, who was chief of station in Amman, Jordan, when he left the agency, in 1998; and Robert Baer, an Arabic speaker who was considered perhaps the best on-the-ground field officer in the Middle East. All left with feelings of bitterness over the agency's procedures for running clandestine operations.

"We'll never solve the terrorism issue until we reconstitute the D.O.," a former senior clandestine officer told me. "The first line of defense, and the most crucial line of defense, is human intelligence." Baer, who was awarded a Career Intelligence Medal after his resignation, in late 1997, said, "You wouldn't believe how bad it is. What saved the White House on Flight 93—the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania—was a bunch of rugby players. Is that what you're paying thirty billion dollars for?" He was referring to the federal budget for intelligence. He and his colleagues aren't surprised that the F.B.I. had no warning of the attack. "The bureau is wonderful in solving crimes after they're committed," one C.I.A. man said. "But it's not good at penetration. We've got to do it."

Today, the C.I.A. doesn't have enough qualified case officers to man its many stations and bases around the world. Two retired agents have been brought back on a rotating basis to take temporary charge of the small base in Karachi, Pakistan, a focal point for terrorist activity. (Karachi was the site of the murder, in 1995, of two Americans, one of them a C.I.A. employee, allegedly in retaliation for the arrest in Pakistan of Ramzi Ahmed Yousef.) A retired agent also runs the larger C.I.A. station in Dacca, Bangladesh, a Muslim nation that could be a source of recruits. Other retirees run C.I.A. stations in Africa.

One hard question is what lengths the C.I.A. should go to. In an interview, two former operations officers cited the tactics used in the late nineteen-eighties by the Jordanian security service, in its successful effort to bring down Abu Nidal, the Palestinian who led what was at the time "the most dangerous terrorist organization in existence," according to the State Department. Abu Nidal's group was best known for its role in two bloody gun and grenade attacks on check-in desks for El Al, the Israeli airline, at the Rome and Vienna airports in December, 1985. At his peak, Abu Nidal threatened the life of King Hussein of Jordan—whom he called "the pygmy king"—and the King responded, according to the former intelligence officers, by telling his state security service, "Go get them."

The Jordanians did not move directly against suspected Abu Nidal followers but seized close family members instead—mothers and brothers. The Abu Nidal suspect would be approached, given a telephone, and told to call his mother, who would say, according to one C.I.A. man, "Son, they'll take care of me if you don't do what they ask." (To his knowledge, the official carefully added, all the suspects agreed to talk before any family members were actually harmed.) By the early nineteen-nineties, the group was crippled by internal dissent and was no longer a significant terrorist organization. (Abu Nidal, now in his sixties and in poor health, is believed to be living quietly in Egypt.) "Jordan is the one nation that totally succeeded in penetrating a group," the official added. "You have to get their families under control."

Such tactics defy the American rule of law, of course, and the C.I.A.'s procedures, but, when it comes to Osama bin Laden and his accomplices, the official insisted, there is no alternative. "We need to do this—knock them down one by one," he said. "Are we serious about getting rid of the problem—instead of sitting around making diversity quilts?"

A few days after the attacks, Vice-President Dick Cheney defended the C.I.A.'s director, George Tenet, on television, saying that it would be a "tragedy" to look for "scapegoats." President Bush subsequently added a note of support with a visit to C.I.A. headquarters. In an interview last week, one top C.I.A. official also defended Tenet. "We know there's a

lot of Monday-morning quarterbacking going on, but people don't understand the conditions that George inherited," he told me. "You can't penetrate a six-man cell when they're brothers and cousins—no matter how much Urdu you know." The official acknowledged that there was much dissatisfaction with the C.I.A.'s performance, but he said, "George has not gotten any word other than that the President has full confidence in him." He went on, "George wouldn't resign in a situation like this."

I was informed by other officials, however, that Tenet's days are numbered. "They've told him he's on his way out," one official said. "He's trying to figure it out—whether to go gracefully or let it appear as if he's going to be fired." A White House adviser explained Cheney's public endorsement of Tenet by saying, "In Washington, your friends always stab you in the chest. Somebody has to take the blame for this." It was his understanding, he added, that "after a decent interval—whenever they get some traction on the problem—he will depart. I've heard three to six months." Even one of Tenet's close friends told me, "He's history."

Tenet's standing was further undermined, after September 11th, by what proved to have been a series of wildly optimistic claims about the effectiveness of the C.I.A.'s Counter Terrorism Center, which was set up in 1986 after a wave of international bombings, airplane hijackings, and kidnappings. The idea was to bring together experts from every American police agency, including the Secret Service, into a "fusion center," which would coordinate intelligence data on terrorism. In October, 1998, after four men linked to bin Laden were indicted for their role in the bombings at the American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, reporters for *Newsweek* were given a tour of the center. The indictments, *Newsweek* reported, "were intended as a clear message to bin Laden and his fugitive followers: the United States knows who they are and where to find them. . . . The story of how the C.I.A. and F.B.I., once bitter bureaucratic rivals, collaborated to roll up bin Laden's elusive network is a tale of state-of-the-art sleuthing—and just plain luck."

But in fact the C.T.C. was not authorized to recruit or handle agents overseas—that task was left to the D.O. and its stations in the Middle East, which had their own priorities. The C.T.C. was bolstered with more money and more manpower after the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, but it remained a paper-shuffling unit whose officers were not required to be proficient in foreign languages. Many of the C.I.A.'s old hands have told me that the C.T.C., despite its high profile, was not an assignment of choice for a young and ambitious D.O. officer. The C.T.C. and two of the other major intelligence centers—dealing with narcotics and nuclear-nonproliferation issues—are so consumed by internecine warfare that the professional analysts find it difficult to do their jobs. "They're all fighting among each other," said one senior

manager who took early retirement and whose last assignment was as the director of one of the centers. “There’s no concentration on issues.”

In 1986, Robert Baer, freshly arrived as a case officer from Khartoum, was drafted into the Counter Terrorism Center, a few months after it was set up, by its director, Duane (Dewey) Clarridge. A draft of a memoir Baer wrote, which will be published by Crown this fall, depicts what happened next:

The first few months was about as exhilarating as it can get in the spy business. Dewey had authority to pretty much do anything he wanted against the terrorists. He had all the money he wanted. . . . It wasn’t long, though, before the politics of intelligence undermined everything Dewey tried to do. . . . It was too risky. A botched—or even a successful—operation would piss off a friendly foreign government. Someone would be thrown out of his cushy post. Someone could even get killed. . . .

You’d ask [the C.I.A. station in] Bonn to recruit a few Arabs and Iranians to track the Middle East émigré community in West Germany, and it would respond that it didn’t have enough officers. You’d ask Beirut to meet a certain agent traveling to Lebanon, and it would refuse because of some security problem. It was nothing but bureaucratic foot-dragging, but it effectively hamstrung anything Dewey tried to do. After six months, Dewey could put his hands on only two Arabic speakers—another officer and me.

Many people in the intelligence community, in their conversations with me, complained bitterly about how difficult it was to work with the Directorate of Operations, even during a crisis. “In order to work on a problem with D.O.,” a former senior scientist told me, “you have to be in D.O.” Similarly, a congressional observer of the C.I.A. came to understand the bureaucratic power of the D.O. “To succeed as director of Central Intelligence,” he said, “you have to ingratiate yourself with the D.O.” Other intelligence sources have told me that the D.O.’s machinations led, at one point, to a feud with the National Security Agency over who would control the Special Collection Service, a joint undertaking of the two agencies that deploys teams of electronics specialists around the world to monitor diplomatic and other communications in moments of crisis. The S.C.S.’s highly secret operations, which produced some of the Cold War’s most valuable data, are usually run from secure sites inside American embassies.

Competence and sophistication were hindered by an absurd amount of bickering. A military man who in 1998 was involved in a Middle East signals-intelligence operation told me that he was not able to discuss the activity with representatives of the C.I.A. and the N.S.A. at the same time. “I used to meet with one in a safe house in Virginia, break

for lunch, and then meet with the other,” the officer said. “They wouldn’t be in the same room.”

If the current crisis does lead to an overhaul of the agency, the Senate and House intelligence committees are not likely to be of much help. Lofgren, Smith, Manners, and Baer, among others, repeatedly met with legislators and their staffs and testified before Congress in an effort to bring about changes. But nothing was done.

Not surprisingly, Republicans and Democrats have differing explanations for what went wrong. One Republican staff member said that Senator Richard C. Shelby, of Alabama, who was the committee’s chairman until early this year, understood that the problem was at the top of the agency. “We do have guys in the field with great ideas who are not supported by the establishment,” the staff member said. But none of the senior Democrats, he said, wanted to embarrass the director, George Tenet, by holding an inquiry or hearings into the various complaints. (Tenet had spent years working for the Democrats on the committee staff, and had served as a member of Bill Clinton’s National Security Council staff before joining the C.I.A.’s management team.)

One Democrat, however, blamed the process within the Senate committee, which, he said, neglected terrorism in favor of more politically charged issues. “Tenet’s been briefing about bin Laden for years, but we weren’t organized to consider what are threats to the United States. We’re chasing whatever the hell is in the news at the moment.”

Former Senator Bob Kerrey, of Nebraska, who served for four years as the Intelligence Committee’s ranking Democrat and is now the president of the New School, in New York, is one of Tenet’s defenders. But Kerrey also acknowledges that he no longer knows “how well we did our job” of legislative oversight. “Nobody with any responsibility can walk away from this. We missed something here.”

Kerrey remains angry about the U.S. policy toward Afghanistan in the years after its defeat of the Soviet Union. “The Cold War was over, and we shut down Afghanistan”—that is, ceased all intelligence operations. “From Bush to Clinton, what happened is one of the most embarrassing American foreign-policy decisions, as bad as Vietnam,” Kerrey said. He cited a botched 1996 C.I.A. plot to overthrow President Saddam Hussein of Iraq: “We also had a half-baked Iraqi operation and sent a signal that we’re not serious.”

Last June, Shelby, after a tour of the Persian Gulf and a series of intelligence briefings, told a *Washington Post* reporter that bin Laden was “on the run, and I think he will continue to be on the run, because we are not going to let up.” He went on, “I don’t think you could say he’s

got us hunkered down. I believe he's more hunkered down." After the bombing, however, Shelby was among the first to suggest publicly that it was time for Tenet to go. "I think he's a good man, and he's done some good things, but there have been a lot of failures on his watch," Shelby told *USA Today*. Tenet, he said, lacked "the stature to control all the agencies. In a sense, he is in charge, but in reality he's not."

One friend and former colleague of Tenet's says that his refusal to urge the Senate leadership to deal with the hard issues was symptomatic of his problems as C.I.A. director. "He's a politician, too," that person said of Tenet. "That's why he shouldn't have been there, because he had no status to tell the senators, 'You don't know what you're talking about.'"

In his memoir, Robert Baer describes the "fatal malaise" that came over the Paris station of the C.I.A. in the early nineties: "Case officers weren't recruiting new agents. The agents already on the books were old. They'd lost their access. And no one seemed to care." Many in the agency were shocked in early 1992 when Milton Bearden, the head of the Soviet-East European division—he had also played a major role in the C.I.A.'s support for the Afghan rebels in their brutal war against the Soviet Union—informed his overseas stations that Russia would now be treated like any other friendly nation, such as Germany or France. The C.I.A. was no longer in the business of recruiting agents to spy against the Russians. In addition, C.I.A. surveillance apartments were closed and wiretaps turned off throughout the Middle East and Europe. "We'll never know the losses we had in terms of not capitalizing on the Soviet collapse," a retired official said. Former high-level Soviet officials with intelligence information or other data were rebuffed. "Walk-ins were turned away. It was stunning, and, as far as I knew, nobody fought it."

Little changed when Bill Clinton took office, in 1993. Baer, now assigned, at his request, to the tiny C.I.A. outpost in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, near the Afghanistan border, watched helplessly as Saudi-backed Islamic fundamentalists—the precursors of the Taliban—consolidated training bases and began to recruit supporters and run operations inside the frontier nations of the former Soviet Union.

In 1995, the agency was widely criticized after the news came out that a paid informant in Guatemala had been involved in the murders of an American innkeeper and the Guatemalan husband of an American lawyer. The informant had been kept on the C.I.A. payroll even though his activities were known to the Directorate of Operations. John Deutch, the C.I.A.'s third director in three years, responded to the abuses, and to the public outcry, by issuing a directive calling for prior approval from headquarters before any person with criminal or human-rights problems could be recruited. The approval, Deutch later explained, was to be based on a simple balancing test: "Is the potential

gain in intelligence worth the cost that might be associated with doing business with a person who may be a murderer?”

The “scrub order,” as it came to be known, was promulgated by Deutch and his colleagues with the best of intentions, and included provisions for case-by-case review. But in practice hundreds of “assets” were indiscriminately stricken from the C.I.A.’s payroll, with a devastating effect on anti-terrorist operations in the Middle East.

The scrub order led to the creation of a series of screening panels at C.I.A. headquarters. Before a new asset could be recruited, a C.I.A. case officer had to seek approval from a Senior Review Panel. “It was like a cardiologist in California deciding whether a surgeon in New York City could cut a chest open,” a former officer recalled. Potential agents were being assessed by officials who had no firsthand experience in covert operations. (“Americans hate intelligence—just hate it,” Robert Baer recalls thinking.) In the view of the operations officers, the most important weapons in the war against international terrorism were being evaluated by men and women who, as one of the retired officers put it, “wouldn’t drive to a D.C. restaurant at night because they were afraid of the crime problem.”

Other bureaucratic panels began “multiplying like rabbits, one after another,” a former station chief said. Experienced officers who were adamant about continuing to recruit spies found that obtaining approval before making a pitch had become a matter of going from committee to committee. “In the old days, they’d say, ‘Go get them,’” the retired officer said. Yet another review process, known as A.V.S.—the asset-validation system—was put in place. Another retired officer told me, “You’d have to write so much paper that guys would spend more time in the station writing reports than out on the street.”

“It was mindless,” a third officer said. “Look, we recruited assholes. I handled bad guys. But we don’t recruit people from the Little Sisters of the Poor—they don’t *know* anything.” He went on, “What we’ve done to *ourselves* is criminal. There are a half-dozen good guys out there trying to keep it together.”

“It did make the workday a lot easier,” Robert Baer said of the edict. “I just watched CNN. No one cared.” The C.I.A.’s vital South Group, made up of eight stations in central Asia—all threatened by fundamentalist organizations, especially in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, with links to the Taliban and bin Laden—had no agents by the mid-nineteen-nineties, Baer said. “The agency was going away.”

Unlike many senior officials at C.I.A. headquarters, Baer had lived undercover, in the nineteen-eighties, in Beirut and elsewhere in the Middle East, and he well understood the ability of terrorist

organizations to cover their tracks. He told me that when the C.I.A. started to go after the Islamic Jihad, a radical Lebanese group linked to a series of kidnappings in the Reagan years, “its people systematically went through documents all over Beirut, even destroying student records. They had the airport wired and could pick the Americans out. They knew whom they wanted to kidnap before he landed.” The terrorists coped with the American ability to intercept conversations worldwide by constantly changing codes—often doing little more than changing the meanings of commonly used phrases. “There’s a professional cadre out there,” Baer said. Referring to the terrorists who struck on September 11th, he said, “These people are so damned good.”



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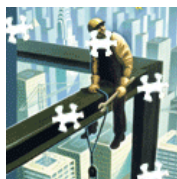
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Seymour M. Hersh wrote his first piece for *The New Yorker* in 1971 and has been a regular contributor to the magazine since 1993.

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