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Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

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The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Amy Tarr (atarr@mit.edu, 617.253.1965).

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Why Intelligence Isn't to Blame for 9/11

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It did not take long for blame for the September 11 attacks to cascade onto the intelligence community. But it is not deserved, and the reasons for that are important.

Blame came from all quarters. "It's an absolute indictment of our intelligence system," declared Rep. Curt Weldon (R-PA), "that an operation of this size was not detected." Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) called September 11 "an utter failure and a day of disgrace" for the intelligence community. Conservative commentators joined in admonishing U.S. intelligence agencies. "Why," William Safire asked, "with $30 billion a year spent on intelligence, couldn't our F.B.I., C.I.A. and N.S.A. prevent this well-coordinated, two-city attack?"[1] Criticism was not restricted to lawmakers and pundits, and condemnations quickly appeared from across the political spectrum. The bipartisan Congressional Joint Inquiry and the independent 9/11 Commission added credibility to the growing conventional wisdom that September 11 was an intelligence failure. In the four years since the attacks, critics have expanded on the reasons why they think this was the case. Their arguments are misleading and inaccurate.

No Failure to Warn

The first criticism is that the intelligence community failed to provide adequate warning of the attacks beforehand. This claim is wildly exaggerated. In reality, the community provided excellent strategic warning about the growing terrorist threat and good tactical warning in 2001. The threat was identified in the early 1990s, and by 1995 the CIA created a unit devoted exclusively to tracking Osama bin Laden. Intelligence officials stressed the unique danger of al Qaeda by the middle of the decade, and policymakers listened. President Clinton mentioned terrorism in every State of the Union address after 1994, and called it a "clear and present danger" to international security in a 1998 speech to the United Nations.[2]

The community also launched a massive surge in tactical warning in early 2001. The FBI issued more than two hundred warnings that year, six of them mentioning airports or airlines. The Federal Aviation Administration issued fifteen other warnings specifically about threats to airlines. In June, the Deputy Director of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center

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(CTC) expressed deep concern that upcoming attacks would be "larger and more deadly."[3] By August, the possibility that bin Laden's operatives might hijack airplanes appeared in the President's Daily Brief. The FAA's intelligence unit reported that a "terrorist group might try to hijack a commercial jet and slam it into a U.S. landmark."[4] While it was not able to pinpoint the exact date or method of the attacks, the community gave policymakers ample opportunity to prepare for an attack.

The second criticism was what the 9/11 Commission called a failure of "institutional imagination."[5] Rather than anticipate new kinds of asymmetrical violence, intelligence clung to obsolete mindsets about threats to national security. This argument is factually wrong and analytically useless. Throughout the 1990s, intelligence analysts pondered a number of different kinds of attack scenarios. Their chief concern was that al Qaeda would acquire weapons of mass destruction, but they also gave considerable attention to the possibility of cyber-terrorism and more mundane operations like airline hijackings and car bombings. In any case, "imagination" is a vapid concept. The 9/11 Commission report seems to refer only to the ability to anticipate specific kinds of spectacular terrorist attacks. But an imaginative intelligence analyst can think up any number of possible horrors, regardless of their likelihood. There is much to be lost from such unchecked scenario building. The intelligence community has limited resources and a large mission; it must put priorities on the kind of intelligence it collects, analyzes, and disseminates to policymakers.

Risk Averse by Popular Demand

Third, critics have argued that the community was badly uncoordinated. Because of the Byzantine bureaucratic structure of American intelligence, and because of cultural and legal barriers to cooperation, huge lapses in data sharing prevented the community from "connecting the dots" and apprehending known terrorists before they could strike. But coordination between intelligence agencies before September 11 was much better than is usually assumed. By September 2001, for example, more than 60,000 names had been forwarded to the State Department's terrorist watch list.[6] The FAA also received about two hundred intelligence reports each day during the summer of 2001 from other intelligence agencies, and opened more than 1,200 files on possible threats.

The surprise of September 11 has also been attributed to the lack of human intelligence in the Islamic world. The shortage of spies is obvious in retrospect, but the blame is misplaced. Throughout the 1990s, the community saw its budgets slashed as political support for aggressive collection withered. Between 1990 and 1999 the CIA's budget was reduced by 22 percent.[7] Allegations of misconduct also led the Agency to restrict its own ability to recruit unsavory sources for fear of being linked to human rights violations abroad. Americans had no stomach for the kind of work the Agency was free to pursue in its halcyon days. Very few observers wanted to unleash the CIA before the September 11 attacks.

Finally, critics charge that the intelligence community was unwilling to aggressively pursue covert operations that would have disrupted al Qaeda before it could strike. Although the CIA and the White House shared the desire to capture or kill Osama bin Laden, neither was willing to shoulder the legal burden for doing so, especially if covert action led to civilian deaths. The CIA wanted specific presidential authorization to use lethal force, but the White House would not deliver. Believing that the CIA was trying to hide behind legal protections, some of President Clinton's aides criticized the Agency for caring more about protecting itself than doing its job. The reluctance to adopt a more aggressive strategy toward bin Laden was evidence that the Agency had become trigger shy.[8]

This condemnation rings hollow. Elected officials are responsible for making policy and should be held accountable for their decisions. In reality, the CIA has often been left holding the bag for policies gone awry. It has pursued covert actions with the tacit approval of presidents and members of Congress, and has been left to take the fall when its actions came to light. Thus intelligence officials had good reason to fear the consequences using lethal force in Afghanistan without explicit presidential approval. Previous revelations of covert activity caused public outrage and forced the CIA to restrict its modus operandi. Intelligence was risk averse by popular demand.

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It feels good to blame intelligence, but this has consequences. If September 11 was the result of insufficient coordination or data sharing, then organizational reforms give us hope that we never have to suffer another surprise attack. But scapegoating intelligence is not cost-free, and national security suffers when intelligence is wrongly blamed. The fallout from September 11 has already damaged morale among intelligence professionals, contributing to an exodus of career officers. It has also led to a massive and costly reorganization of the intelligence community. Last year's intelligence reform bill added several layers to an already complicated bureaucracy, and it is unclear how these changes will lead to any real improvement in performance. The community would benefit more if reforms focused on improving analytic techniques, increasing the quality of new hires, and retaining long-term professionals.

Most worrying is the possibility that intelligence-policy relations could be poisoned for years to come. Relations between policymakers and intelligence agencies are difficult in the best of times. Intelligence can challenge the wisdom of strategic decisions, and policymakers often view intelligence as an obstacle rather than an asset. For others, intelligence is simply irrelevant to the decision-making process. The more that "intelligence failures" are accepted as such in the conventional wisdom, the more leaders will ignore their intelligence advisors.

Who is to Blame?

September 11 was not an intelligence failure, it was a national failure. By the end of the decade al Qaeda had evolved into a formidable adversary. Its agents were committed, flexible, and well-funded. Small-scale counterterrorism operations faced significant obstacles, especially given the operational security that surrounded bin Laden and his cohorts. In retrospect, a conventional invasion of Afghanistan was probably the best way of preventing September 11. But there was no constituency for an invasion before the attacks occurred.

Neither the Clinton nor Bush administrations seriously considered the option. Fearing civilian casualties and mindful of the possible consequences for South Asian politics, the Clinton White House was never ready to authorize aggressive operations against Osama bin Laden. President Bush was focused on other international concerns when he took office, despite the fact that intelligence briefings during the transition emphasized that al Qaeda was the most pressing threat to national security.[9] Meanwhile, there was little interest in military action within the Department of Defense. According to officials in the CTC, "the military leveled so many requirements for highly detailed, actionable intelligence—far beyond what the Intelligence Community was ever likely to obtain—that U.S. military units were effectively precluded from conducting operations against bin Laden's organization on the ground in Afghanistan before September 11."[10]

Nor was there any sustained pressure for action from Congress or the State Department. Indeed, President Clinton's strongest effort against bin Laden was met with suspicion on Capitol Hill. After he ordered cruise missile strikes against al Qaeda training camps in 1998, some Republicans argued that he was merely trying to distract attention from his ongoing impeachment ordeal. For its part, the State Department never treated al Qaeda as a top priority. Secretary of State Colin Powell only asked for $7 million to be spent on Afghanistan when he outlined his budget priorities to the Senate in May 2001, and those resources were intended for issues like regional energy cooperation and child prostitution.[11]

Security experts outside the government were no more enthusiastic. Some scholars wrote about the growing threat during the 1990s, but terrorism competed with many other issues for print space. Those who focused on terrorism usually recommended paying more attention to the rise of religious violence and enhancing civil defense. Even the most strident proponents of aggressive counterterrorism did not suggest anything like Operation Enduring Freedom. Reuel Marc Gerecht, for example, called for overt support of bin Laden's main rival in Afghanistan, which "might eventually force al-Qa'ida's leader to flee Afghanistan, where U.S. and allied intelligence and military forces cannot reach him."[12]

Finally, Americans overwhelmingly favored diplomacy over military solutions to counterterrorism during the 1990s. Even after the embassy bombings in 1998, multilateral approaches were more popular than military means. Although the public increasingly supported the use of surgical strikes, there is little to suggest that it desired a wholesale invasion. This is not surprising, given the lack of interest among public officials and security experts.

The intelligence community is far from perfect. It suffers from a number of bureaucratic pathologies that are common to many large organizations. It is also capable of serious errors, and there are a number of practical reforms that can improve performance. But September 11 was a national failure, and the effort against terrorism requires a national response. Instead of indulging in condemnations of intelligence, we must come to grips with the larger problems in dealing with transnational organizations. This means engaging in a frank and sober discussion of how American foreign policy affects international attitudes toward the United States, and what kind of grand strategy can reduce terrorists' capabilities without enhancing their popularity abroad.

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article footnotes

1 William Safire, "New Day of Infamy," *New York Times*, September 12, 2001, p. 27. Weldon is quoted in Sally Buzbee, "Lawmakers Denounce U.S. Terrorism Intelligence," Associated Press, September 13, 2001. Rohrabacher is quoted in John Omicinski, "CIA, nation's other spy agencies were caught off guard," *Gannett News Service*, September 13, 2001.

2 For a catalogue of policy responses to the increased strategic warning, see Amy B. Zegart, "September 11 and the Adaptation Failure of the U.S. Intelligence Agencies," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Spring 2005), pp. 78-111, at 83-85.

3 Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, From the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan to September 10, 2001* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), pp. 559-560.

4 Eric Lichtblau, "F.A.A. Alerted on Qaeda in '98, 9/11 Panel Said," *New York Times*, September 14, 2005, p. 1.

5 *9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 339-348.

6 Josh Meyer, "At Least 70,000 Terrorist Suspects on Watch List," *Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 2002, p. A1.

7 Roger Z. George, "Fixing the Problem of Analytical Mind-Sets: Alternative Analysis," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Autumn 2004), pp. 385-404, at 391.

8 Coll, *Ghost Wars*, p. 428.

9 Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), pp. 286-297.

10 *Joint Inquiry*, pp. 305-307, quoted at 306.

11 Coll, *Ghost Wars*, p. 559.

12 Reuel Marc Gerecht, "The Counterterrorism Myth," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 288, No.1 (July/August 2001), pp. 38-41, at 41.

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