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## **The September 11<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Post-Mortem: Lessons for Europe?**

Despite the extensive history of congressional investigation into the US intelligence community, ranging from the Church Committee to the various reports on the assassination on president Kennedy to Vietnam and the post-Watergate affairs, few such efforts can match the level of interest and exposure afforded the findings of the 9/11 committee that were recently released, nor the political fighting regarding its contents. As a part of the general chain of events pertaining to national security sector reform in the United States, the report and related evidence and recommendations bear examination on their own merit and with regard to what Europe can learn from this post-mortem.

### **Concrete Conclusions**

Whilst the final report (with certain “sensitive” sections removed until after the presidential election) and its various appended findings runs to several volumes and hundreds of pages - versions of which can already be found in paperback form on the bookshelves of most American bookstores - it is possible to précis the most important of observations and conclusions brought by the joint committee. They are that:

- The US IC Intelligence Community had prior to 9/11 a large amount of intelligence as its disposal relating to bin Laden and al Qaeda activities but no specific information as to the time, place and nature of the imminent attacks
- In the Spring and Summer preceding the attacks there was a marked increase in intelligence arriving to the IC indicating an imminent attack on the mainland of the USA
- From at least 1994 onwards the IC received information to the effect that terrorists were contemplating the use of aircraft as weapons. This information did not stimulate any specific assessment of this form of attack
- The IC demonstrated a lack of initiative in coming to grips with new transnational threats
- The National Security Agency (NSA) in particular intercepted communications by participants in the attack, connecting them to terrorist activities.
- Critical morsels of intelligence concerning key players such as Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi “lay dormant” within the IC for as long as a year and a half



- prior to the attacks and the CIA missed repeated opportunities to act on information regarding the two which it already had in its possession
- The two hijackers in fact had numerous meetings with a long-time FBI counter-terrorism informant operating in California. The CIA additionally failed to forward relevant information on these individuals to the FBI, information that would have likely prompted the Bureau to use its informant to target the future hijackers
  - In July of 2001, an FBI agent in Phoenix electronically informed the DC headquarters of the FBI and its New York field office that Osama bin Laden was co-ordinating efforts to send students to the US for civil aviation-related training. The communication garnered “little or no interest” in either office. Likewise, the key figure, Khalid Shaykh Mohammed had already been connected not only to bin Laden, but to plans to use aircraft as weapons and to terrorist activities in the US.

In short “the Intelligence Community failed to capitalise on both the individual and collective significance of available information that appears relevant to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>.” It thus failed to take steps that “could have greatly enhanced its chances of uncovering and preventing” the plan to attack the US.

### Changes Already Made

Subsequently many of the more scathing findings have been used to retroactively justify the huge reforms brought by the Bush administration to the national security architecture of the United States. In various steps, together no less significant than the initial 1947 National Security Act that created the CIA and most of the existing systems, the White House has radically regrouped existing agencies and capabilities. First came the creation of the Office of Homeland Security within the White House, followed later by the creation of a new Super Ministry, the Department of Homeland Security. Bringing together more than 20 existing agencies and competencies with a staff of well over 100,000 employees and a budget of in excess of 30 billion dollars, the DHS represents a behemoth agency currently headed at cabinet level by Tom Ridge, former governor of Pennsylvania.

It has been said, however, that given the hyper-mobile, internationally dispersed, flexible and institutionally horizontal nature of the core threat that is al Qaeda, that the DHS is not the most apposite of response, being more redolent of a Cold War mentality than a modern transnationally focused approach. Beyond such observations, in the last few weeks there have been even sharper criticisms. Whilst the 9/11 committee called for the creation of yet another new cabinet level position, Director of Intelligence, seven Republican members of Congress have proposed, given the sorry state of the current intelligence capability and the infighting that abounds, that the CIA itself be disbanded and its various functions be hived off into existing or even new structures more applicable to domestic intelligence gathering and counter intelligence versus international espionage. At the moment the Bush-led White House is being tight-lipped in response, at most potentially agreeing to a review of a watered down version of the 9/11 lesser recommendations.



## Reaction and Lessons for Europe

Whilst reactions from the continent to these suggestions has been muted, at least outside of academe, there are clear lessons to be learnt with regards to 9/11. It is clear, based upon the recently published EU Security Strategy document released by the office of Javier Solana, that at least some policy circles share elements of the US world view. Although this may seem surprising, it is worth comparing this text to the US's own National Security Strategy, also released not too long ago. The threat perceptions in each, especially with regard to WMD are quite similar, despite the EU document not necessarily being a reflection of the opinion of all EU administrations, or ministries of defence.

On a more practical level, there is the more visceral fact that 9/11 was as an operation facilitated by the actions of many terrorists based for a time within the EU. The German cells surrounding the alleged 9/11 mastermind, Mohammed Atta, are of particular import, especially since recent developments have connected members of these cells to the logistical support structures behind the Madrid bombings of March of this year.

Even so, at the more public and political level, the difference of opinion or threat perception is exaggerated or at least exacerbated due to the more obvious differences between the US and European administrations concerning the question of Iraq and the future of Afghanistan. There was an expectation within the corridors of Washington that a mass casualty attack in Europe would bring a commonality of view and renewed spirit of cooperation and sympathy with the US. Madrid proved that this expectation was unfounded. As a result we must ask the question: Does "Europe" as a collection of independent national governments see itself as threatened in a radically new and significant way by Muslim extremism as typified by al Qaeda? If it does then are the existing tools of the national security sector adequate to the job of preventing further attacks on the mainland? If the answer to the latter question is No, or a half-hearted Yes, then we may do well to consider our own broad ranging review of security and intelligence capabilities which go beyond the politically charged question of why Iraq was in fact invaded. To wait for the proverbial "smoking gun", be in the hands of Osama bin Laden or another actor, presupposes that we have already been shot. This is not a mature or responsible policy stance.

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