

# The Intelligence Blame Game

**“W**hat went wrong and why?” U.S. congressional insistence that U.S. intelligence agencies explain their pre-September 11 performance may miss the real culprit. As Pogo put it, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.” We really ought to be asking rather different questions. Before the attack, would a few FBI field memoranda have changed our policies on airport security or persuaded us to reorganize the FBI? It isn’t likely; hindsight has a way of making clues leap out at us. But before the attacks, we were blinded by our complacency and by a kind of endemic mistrust of what our intelligence agencies were telling us. In many quarters, perhaps especially academic ones, it was easy to ignore warnings as a form of intelligence paranoia. Who, after all, took the 1998 Hart-Rudman report on security threats seriously or credited former CIA Director Jim Woolsey’s post-Cold War warning that, having slain the dragon, we would now confront a world of poisonous snakes?

The present incredulity about the September attack is the reverse image of an earlier naïveté, and the list of those who helped maintain that naïveté is legion. Government and funding agencies could have fostered education and research relevant to security. Universities might have placed greater emphasis on language and area studies and other subjects relevant to dealing with terrorism, and perhaps have overcome an out-of-date suspicion of intelligence gathering.

Instead of looking to such causes, we continue to ask the FBI and the intelligence community to take the fall for September 11. That’s not fair. The FBI operates under rules for training, organization, and operations designed, by the citizens of the United States, for other purposes. The snippets of information now emerging from the notorious memos lacked direct significance for criminal investigation, which has been the FBI’s limited mandate since the post-Watergate and Vietnam War reforms. It would thus have required the kind of analysis that the FBI is neither trained nor staffed to do. As for the intelligence community, it had been raising concerns about terrorist threats well before the attack, but restrictions designed by all of us prevented much sharing of domestically gathered information. It is disingenuous to complain about agencies when they perform just as we intended them to.

Prevention of terrorism is a legitimate national objective, and it deserves serious attention from the research and scholarly communities. Having been on both sides of that fence, I am convinced that this is made more difficult than it needs to be by the fractured relationship between academia and the intelligence community. At the University of Wisconsin, I saw an excellent multidisciplinary project to study responses to terrorism rejected because it was not thought sufficiently interesting as a scholarly exercise, and I sensed a general impatience with what some colleagues viewed as the “fussy” security concerns of the intelligence sector.

Ironically, this estrangement persists despite the post-Watergate and Vietnam War reforms, which imposed sharp restrictions on the ability of intelligence and law enforcement to deal with transborder threats, as well as inhibiting their efforts to communicate and cooperate in confronting terrorism at home. One might have thought that these restrictions would have brought about an increase in academic confidence in dealing with security needs. Apparently they didn’t. But those needs are real; and now that the reality is plain to everyone, it is time for some behavioral change.

U.S. universities have begun to recognize the need to adhere to existing rules regarding alien documentation that have been ignored in the past by both government and academia. Conversations among academic leaders and government officials have begun to initiate cooperation of other kinds as well. But there is a far greater set of opportunities to be fulfilled by the reestablishment of trust between the two communities: the work of exploring and understanding the sources of terrorism. That will require the finest minds we have. To engage them in this work, the universities will have to renew their trust in the people and institutions that do national security work, and the security community will have to continue to earn it. The universities must then reawaken their interest in the disciplines vital to the task: area and language studies, the relevant sciences, interdisciplinary legal studies, international cooperation, and arms control. With those changes, the two sectors could launch a more serious and productive effort to understand the nature of terrorism and the underlying conditions that nurture it. It is an effort the United States desperately needs.

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