

BLAME

Safety from external danger is the most powerful director of national conduct. Even the ardent love of liberty will, after a time, give way to its dictates.

—Federalist Papers, No. 8

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, it was hard to believe that the news could get any worse for George Tenet or the CIA, the agency he had led since 1997. But when a team of analysts sorted through masses of cables and electronic communications in a conference room in the campuslike CIA headquarters in McLean, Virginia, it found some terrible news, which it soon delivered to Tenet and his chief of staff, John Moseman. Buried in the CIA's files was the trail of two of the 9/11 hijackers. The records showed that the Agency had followed the Al Qaeda suspects into the United States in 2000 and then dropped the case. For more than a year, despite the Agency's awareness that the pair was at large inside the United States, no one had alerted the FBI. *IT WAS WORSE THAN THIS!*

Upon hearing the news, Tenet, a warm bear of a man known for his locker-room banter and cheerleading for the CIA, reeled back in his desk chair and groaned.

"We're fucked!" is all he said. *WITH NO F.V. - SOURCES?*

By the night of September 11, it had already become clear that the mastermind behind the morning's four catastrophic terrorist attacks was the messianic Saudi millionaire Osama Bin Laden, the Islamic fundamentalist whom the CIA had been tracking for at least five

Later, when those investigations materialized as expected, Tenet testified that he had seen the warning signs of Al Qaeda's impending attacks, or as he put it, "the system was blinking red," and that the CIA had done all that it possibly could to get the Bush Administration's attention. But Moseman knew that the damning cable traffic would be used to tell another story—for the CIA's opponents it would be seen as "the smoking gun."

Cofer Black, the head of the CIA's terror-fighting operation, known as the Counterterrorist Center or CTC, was a lead character in the backstory. That night and for five days afterward, Black slept in his office at the CIA. He never went home. "He took it very hard—like 9/11 was a personal failure," said Tyler Drumheller, the former Chief of the CIA's Clandestine Operations in Europe, who was an old friend. To some extent, it was.

As head of the CTC, Black supervised the Bin Laden Unjt. All summer he had told anyone who would listen that his gut told him, "Something terrible is going to happen!" There is going to be an attack of massive proportions."

But one of the things that mystified Black's colleagues was how he could have been as alarmed as he was about Al Qaeda yet fail to piece together the many fragments of the September 11 puzzle that reached the Agency prior to the attacks.

It was a tangled story, filled with good intentions and near misses, complicated by increasingly fractious relations with the rivalrous FBI. In some ways, it began three years and one month earlier, when Al Qaeda blew up the U.S. embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, killing 247 innocent people, including 12 Americans, and injuring some 5,000 others. FBI counterterrorism agents who had been sent to the scene of the crime in Africa from the New York field office had pried loose a prized piece of intelligence that later proved key to U.S. efforts to track Al Qaeda. The agents had milked a confession out of a Saudi suspect in the bomb plot. “Without any coercion at all, other than

The Saudi suspect had traded change for a promise not to be sent to stand trial in the United States. American justice, the Saudi suspect told the agents, “We have a plan ready yet. We need to hit you before you won’t see what is going on. There’s nothing you can do to stop it. There’s even more so in retrospect was revealed: The phone number he had in-law of one of the future 9/11

Before the FBI could even take the messy bombing case, they shared the CIA's station chief in Nairobi, Kenya, at Fort Meade, Maryland, which had the capacity to "go up on the line" and proved an intelligence gold mine. The tenants used it as a central co-

While reading transcripts approximately a year and eight months ago, I caught word of an impending attack by Qaeda terrorists, planned for September 11. An alert CIA desk officer immediately informed me. "A nefarious was at foot." All the while, I was aware of three suspects who were plotting the attack. One suspect, however, was soon identified as a future hijacker, and son-in-law of a prominent registered. Soon after, the CIA learned that the Dubai to the meeting in Kuala Lumpur was a

Mihdhar was a Saudi national who had been intensifying during the conflict in Afghanistan and Bosnia, along with a pair had applied for visas to travel to the U.S. friend had "martyred" himself in the U.S. embassy in Kenya. Evidence

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feeding him," one of the FBI agents later said, he gave up a phone number he had called both before and after the attack. The number, 967-1-200578 in Yemen, was a rare landline belonging to a jihadi named Ahmed al-Hada.

The Saudi suspect had traded this information to the FBI in exchange for a promise not to be prosecuted in Kenya, but instead to be sent to stand trial in the United States. Despite his preference for American justice, the Saudi suspect in the bomb plot then sneeringly told the agents, "We have a plan to attack the U.S., but we're not ready yet. We need to hit you outside the country in a few places so you won't see what is going on inside. The big attack is coming. There's nothing you can do to stop it." The threat was significant, but even more so in retrospect was something the Saudi suspect didn't reveal: The phone number he had relinquished belonged to the father-in-law of one of the future 9/11 hijackers, Khalid al-Mihdhar.

Before the FBI could even finish writing up its reports on the embassy bombing case, they shared the crucial phone number with the CIA's station chief in Nairobi and the National Security Agency in Fort Meade, Maryland, which used its vast electronic eavesdropping capacity to "go up on the line." Over time, this one phone number proved an intelligence gold mine. Bin Laden and many of his lieutenants used it as a central communications hub for their planning.

While reading transcripts of NSA intercepts from this phone line approximately a year and eight months before September 11, the CIA caught word of an impending operational meeting of suspected Al Qaeda terrorists, planned for early January 2000 in Kuala Lumpur. An alert CIA desk officer immediately surmised that "something more nefarious was at foot." All the CIA had at that time were the first names of three suspects who were planning to attend the meeting. One suspect, however, was soon identified in full, as Khalid al-Mihdhar, the future hijacker, and son-in-law of the man to whom the phone was registered. Soon after, the CIA tracked his path from Yemen through Dubai to the meeting in Kuala Lumpur.

Mihdhar was a Saudi national, born in Mecca, whose fanaticism had been intensifying during years of fighting as a mujahideen in Afghanistan and Bosnia, along with his friend Nawaf al-Hazmi. The pair had applied for visas to the United States after another close friend had "martyred" himself in the 1998 suicide bombing of the U.S. embassy in Kenya. Evidently, they were bent on reviving their

lost friend's cause, the infliction of maximum carnage and mayhem on America. Their aims meshed perfectly with those of Bin Laden and fellow Islamic terrorist Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who had joined forces in Afghanistan by 1999. Bin Laden by then supported a plan proposed by Mohammed to hijack multiple airliners ^{CRASH THEM} into symbolic American targets. With the plan, which they called "The Planes Operation," they hoped to create a demonstration of terror more spectacular than any the world had ever seen. Bin Laden selected Mihdhar and Hazmi as two of his future hijackers. Further details would be discussed among the operatives at the Kuala Lumpur meeting on January 5, 2000. On the morning of September 11, 2001, the pair would board American Airlines Flight 77 and commandeer it head-on at full speed into the Pentagon.

In Dubai, where Mihdhar changed planes on his way to the planning meeting, he was pulled aside at the request of U.S. intelligence officials. While his bags were searched, his passport was secretly photocopied. Alarming, it contained a valid multi-entry visa for the United States and information showing that his ultimate destination was New York. Dubai security officials sent photocopies to the CIA station in Dubai and to the Bin Laden Unit of the CIA back in Virginia.

Soon after, the CIA asked the Malaysian security service to spy on the Kuala Lumpur meeting, which took place as planned on January 5, 2000. The Malaysians' attempt to plant hidden microphones failed. But the Malaysian liaison services managed to take multiple photographs of the terrorists, all of whom were unidentified at the time except for Mihdhar. The photos were also sent to the CIA.

After the meeting, three of the suspects flew on to Bangkok, including Mihdhar and someone whose last name was known by then as Hazmi. But bafflingly, the CIA lost the future hijackers' trail at this point. According to one report, the Bin Laden Unit waited too long to get word to the CIA station in Thailand, and by the time the Bangkok agents started looking for the suspects, they had already disappeared. In March 2000, uneasy CIA officers in Malaysia prodded their counterparts in Thailand to look harder. This produced an extraordinary piece of news. One of the suspects, now fully identified as Nawaf al-Hazmi, had flown to Los Angeles six weeks earlier, on January 15, 2000. The CIA at this point found no trace of Mihdhar at all. Yet later it was discovered that he had flown to Los Angeles on the same flight. WHE-?

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The investigation by the independent bipartisan 9/11 Commission concluded in 2004 that although the CIA's Counterterrorist Center and its Bin Laden Unit were informed that Hazmi, a suspected Al Qaeda operative, had infiltrated the United States fully a year and a half before the attacks on New York and Washington, at this point the Agency shared this information with no one else. The CIA didn't alert the State Department's "TIPOFF" watch list to search for information of the pair's travels. Nor did the CIA share this explosive information with the FBI, which had primary domestic responsibility for protecting the United States from terrorism, and a team of agents specifically devoted to going after Al Qaeda. Instead, the Commission found "nothing more was done to track" the suspects for a year. Only then, when one of the suspects' names surfaced in the separate investigation into the 2000 Cole bombing, was interest reignited. The case went cold because of a bureaucratic blunder. In an oversight, Tenet later conceded, the CIA's Counterterrorist Center mislabeled the cable it got from Bangkok warning that the Al Qaeda suspect had flown to the United States. The CTC categorized it as "information"—meaning interesting, but not very—rather than "action" requiring immediate follow-up.

During this period prior to September 11, inside the CIA's Counterterrorist Center, several FBI agents were on loan from the Bureau in a deliberate effort to foster bureaucratic synergy. Given the history of animosity and rivalry between the two departments, it was jokingly referred to as "The Hostage Exchange Program." Doug Miller, one of these FBI agents on loan to the CIA, had access to what was called "bigoted"—meaning not shared—information on the CIA's Hercules computer system. There he saw the electronic communications mentioning that Hazmi had entered the United States. Twice, according to later investigations, he asked permission of his CIA supervisor to forward this disturbing information to his colleagues at the FBI. He wrote up a draft memo, to be sent to the FBI, and was ready to send it. But his boss, a CIA desk officer in the Bin Laden Unit of the Counterterrorist Center who is identified by the 9/11 Commission only as "Mike," and whose real name has never been revealed, stopped him from passing it on. After the second try, Miller dropped the matter. Oddly, three hours after "Mike" told Miller to hold off on sending the memo, formally known as a Central Intelligence Report, he nonetheless notified his bosses that the information had been shared with the FBI. The CIA assumed from then on that it

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had been. But it never was. The contradiction was never explained. An investigator with the 9/11 Commission who tried to sort through the details said of "Mike," "He said he couldn't remember what happened." Astonishingly, "Mike," the investigator later learned, was given a promotion by the Agency after September 11.

It was Doug Miller's unsent Central Intelligence Report informing the FBI that an Al Qaeda operative had penetrated America that Tenet and Moseman had learned about after the CIA team had reconstructed the nauseatingly damning paper trail.

In 2007, the CIA's own independent Inspector General released a report on the performance of the Agency prior to September 11 that was more damning still. It remains largely classified. But what was released was the IG's conclusion that by March 2000 fully fifty or sixty individuals within the CIA knew that two Al Qaeda suspects had come to America—but no one officially notified the FBI about this. It said the CIA had failed to inform the FBI through "prescribed channels" of Mihdhar and other terrorists' "intended or actual travel to the United States."

"The two guys' names were just sitting in someone's outbox. It just didn't get done," a former top officer in the CIA's clandestine service admitted. The Bin Laden Unit of the Counterterrorist Center, he said, "was just chaotic. There were piles and piles and PILES of un-translated intercepts." The problem, he said, was not a lack of urgency, but rather a failure of management. "When everything is a crisis, nothing is a crisis." In short, the errors were painfully mundane: misfiled paperwork, inattentive government employees, misunderstandings and miscommunications—just commonplace incompetence.

No one was more critical of the CIA's counterterrorism record than the FBI agents assigned to a New York-based squad known as "I-49." They had been tracking and arresting Middle Eastern terrorists since the mid-1990s, many of whom had been successfully convicted. Among the most articulate of these agents was a former English and Latin major named Jack Cloonan. Driving a zippy Mini Cooper, sporting an Inspector Poirot-like mustache, and telling stories with verve and humor in a thick accent redolent of his upbringing in Waltham, Massachusetts, Cloonan didn't seem the image of J. Edgar Hoover's buttoned-down FBI. In fact, Cloonan had joined the Bureau the day that Hoover died in 1972. He was one of the first FBI agents chosen to work with the CIA as part of a "fusion cell" after President Clinton signed an intelligence finding declaring war against Al Qaeda

in 1996. Clinton directed the cluding the FBI, to work together on a prosecutable case against Bin Laden. Cloonan immersed himself in the firm's operations, helped him and his colleagues identify informants, or as the FBI called them, informants were eventually referred to the Department of Justice. Their job was teaching the American intelligence community about Al Qaeda.

"Clearly, something went wrong on September 11. "But it's never been talked about how the criminal justice system but the point is, you got actual evidence, a fashioned detective spade work, a lead for the Kuala Lumpur meeting, a tapped phone number obtained from a source in the FBI in Yemen. "The question is, why didn't we do with it? They let these people go."

In Cloonan's view, "What was the follow-up on these two people? They were Hazmi." Cloonan was realistic. He knew the edge that even had the FBI been alerted, had come to America, there would have prevented detection of the attack. Cloonan, more than most, left much to be desired. One of the future hijackers boarded a plane in California and the Bureau of Investigation, in August of 2001, FBI field office permission to search for Moussaoui, an Al Qaeda operative. An urgent memo to FBI field offices about terrorists in flight schools also. "If the FBI had known six months earlier, for example, I think you can predict that the plane would have come out differently. It was a failure, it was human failure, it was doing their jobs well. The rest of the world was watching."

The near misses still haunted Cloonan. It would his whole life. "How

Clinton -
Al Qaeda

in 1996. Clinton directed the entire U.S. intelligence community, including the FBI, to work together in an effort to put together a prosecutable case against Bin Laden and his associates. Cloonan had immersed himself in the fine details of Islamic terrorism, which helped him and his colleagues recruit and debrief two major Al Qaeda informants, or as the FBI called them, "cooperating witnesses." Both informants were eventually delivered into the custody of the U.S. Department of Justice. Their statements filled hundreds of pages, teaching the American intelligence community much of what it knew about Al Qaeda.

"Clearly, something went terribly wrong," said Cloonan about September 11. "But it's never been adequately explained. Everybody talks about how the criminal process is so cumbersome and all this, but the point is, you got actionable intelligence through good old-fashioned detective spade work," he said, referring to Al Qaeda's plans for the Kuala Lumpur meeting, which were overheard on a legally tapped phone number obtained through noncoercive means by the FBI in Yemen. "The question is: What did the intelligence agency do with it? They let these people fade off the screen!" //

In Cloonan's view, "What 9/11 is really all about was the lack of follow-up on these two people, Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi." Cloonan was realistic and self-critical enough to acknowledge that even had the FBI been informed that these two terrorists had come to America, there might still have been errors that would have prevented detection of the plot. The FBI's record, he knew better than most, left much to be desired, too. After entering America, one of the future hijackers boarded in a house with an FBI informant in California and the Bureau never learned anything about it. In addition, in August of 2001, FBI headquarters denied its Minneapolis field office permission to search the laptop computer of Zacarias Moussaoui, an Al Qaeda operative training for a second wave of attacks. An urgent memo to FBI Headquarters about potential Islamic terrorists in flight schools also went unheeded. But Cloonan ventured, "If the FBI had known sixteen months before to monitor these people, I think you can predict with a fair amount of certainty that it would have come out differently. So it wasn't some big systematic failure, it was human failure. It gets down to a couple of people not doing their jobs well. The rest is all damage control."

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The near misses still haunted Cloonan years later, and undoubtedly would his whole life. "How often do you get into someone's suitcase

and find multiple-entry visas? And how often do you know there's going to be an organizational meeting of Al Qaeda, anyplace in the world?" he asked. "The chances are slim to none! This is as good as it gets. It's a home run in the ninth inning of the World Series. This is the kind of case you hope your whole life for. That's why you do all this work, you have thousands of cases, you've got agents spending their lives doing all kinds of stuff, responding to every crank call that comes in, and here you are. This is what you would dream about. This is what you trained for. What you planned for, what you hope for. You want to be lucky. And that was being lucky."

Barely pausing for a breath, almost in a conversation with himself, Cloonan shook his gray head. "And then, after the group breaks up in Kuala Lumpur, and they go to Thailand, you're telling me you just lost sight of it? You just forgot to put them on the notifications list? That's as bad as it gets! You don't have to be a seasoned counter-terrorism agent to know what's at stake here. It takes all of about ten seconds to sit at a keyboard and say boom, 'let's put them on the watch list.' But you say you didn't do it? You didn't think it was important? It was an oversight? Oops? It's not acceptable. And it never will be."

no ACCOUNTABILITY!
No one seemed to be holding the responsible individuals at the CIA and FBI accountable. Cloonan watched with a growing sense of anger and disgust, and in the days and weeks and even years after September 11, there was what he called "this big incredible mumble." Mocking the experts, he said, "It's about information sharing, and structural deficiencies, and 'the wall.' It's about the lack of preemptive philosophy, and the need to use 'enhanced interrogation methods,' and so on and so forth."

FAKE WAS NOT STRUCTURAL
In reality, though, he insisted, "If you get into the weeds on this, you find out, you know what? It's not structural, it's not organizational—it's about human failure. It's people not doing their job. It's just that simple. And all this other stuff just obscures that fact."

The costs of this ordinary incompetence, in his view, were almost too awful for the country and the culpable individuals to face. "Was it preventable? Was 9/11 preventable?" he asked himself out loud, replaying a question that clearly ran through his head relentlessly.

"This was all preventable," he concluded. "It was all there."

Tenet certainly told the history differently. He argued strenuously in the days and years to follow that he and the Agency had done almost everything they could to warn the White House of the growing risk they saw from Al Qaeda. But the CIA's record was uneven. The

Agency had been riven by should be toward Bin Laden, political risk and personal judgment or international law.

Before leaving office, Berger, had tried to emphasize how grave a threat Bin Laden posed to the United States. "Al Qaeda," a former top Agency official said. "There was bar for something on them. He had to do it as if there they had just open blue sky preparing an aggressive action. Known as the 'B' steps he believed the new administration. All that was missing was P the most crucial, he argued partners in Afghanistan, to

There was a long and complex issue. Clinton had authorized in accordance with the law "self-defense." At one point to allow Afghan surrogate authorization with a less aggressive

The arguments about "self-defense" in the late 1990s, with Clinton's administration questioning whether it was justified as "self-defense." Renowned fact, she frequently reminded like every other federal agency banned from carrying out a revelations that the Agency in the 1960s. Like police officers, own defense. Also, under rule killings were permissible. In sanctioned and illegal killing by a new presidential finding the Agency step on the wrong

The lesson that CIA managers to get everything in writing

Agency had been riven by internal arguments over how aggressive it should be toward Bin Laden. The constraints had more to do with political risk and personal judgment than barriers imposed by domestic or international law.

Before leaving office, Clinton's national security adviser, Sandy Berger, had tried to emphasize in a private briefing with his successors how grave a threat Bin Laden posed. Berger was "truly obsessed with Al Qaeda," a former top Agency official who spanned both administrations said. "There was barely a day that went by that he didn't ask us for something on them. He urged the Agency to write up a plan of attack and do it as if there were no financial or other restraints—as if they had just open blue skies." At the CTC, Cofer Black responded by preparing an aggressive action plan for the incoming Bush Administration. Known as the "Blue Sky Memo," it listed a series of radical steps he believed the new administration should take against Al Qaeda. All that was missing was President Bush's authorization. Of these steps, the most crucial, he argued, was for Bush to authorize the CIA, or its partners in Afghanistan, to kill Bin Laden.

There was a long and complicated history behind the "deadly force" issue. Clinton had authorized the CIA to try to capture Bin Laden but, in accordance with the law, said the Agency could kill him only in "self-defense." At one point, Clinton reportedly authorized the Agency to allow Afghan surrogates to kill Bin Laden. But he superseded this authorization with a less aggressive one two months later.

The arguments about "kill authority" took on a surreal quality in the late 1990s, with Clinton's attorney general, Janet Reno, repeatedly questioning whether a proposed targeted killing could be classified as "self-defense." Reno was particularly sensitive to the issue. In fact, she frequently reminded the CIA that it was bound by U.S. laws like every other federal agency. The CIA had been categorically banned from carrying out assassinations in 1976 following scandalous revelations that the Agency had tried to kill Fidel Castro in the 1960s. Like police officers, however, CIA officials could kill in their own defense. Also, under rules of military engagement, some targeted killings were permissible. During the Clinton years, the line between sanctioned and illegal killing remained murky. Unless it was clarified by a new presidential finding, the CIA's lawyers were not about to let the Agency step on the wrong side of the law.

The lesson that CIA managers had learned from past scandals was to get everything in writing from the lawyers, preferably with a

presidential signature at the bottom. Even those militating for more aggressive action, such as Cofer Black, were cautious about legal liability. Black was apt to cite King Henry II's famously indirect order to kill Thomas à Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury—"Who will rid me of this meddlesome priest?"—as exactly the sort of vague presidential command to avoid. After seeing midlevel colleagues convicted for following what they thought were presidential wishes in the Iran-Contra scandal, Black warned his subordinates that the CIA was not in the "rid-me-of-this-priest business."

Some of Tenet's underlings in the Agency grew increasingly frustrated with what they regarded as an overabundance of caution at the CIA. This was particularly true of Black. But despite pressure from the counterterrorism staff, Tenet himself never advised either President Clinton or President Bush to approve the use of lethal force against Al Qaeda. To him, it seemed drastic and politically risky. Tenet acknowledged in his memoir that he had fallen short of endorsing targeted killings because he had wondered, "How would the U.S. government explain it if Arab terrorists in Afghanistan suddenly started being blown up?" Before September 11, the American public would likely have given little support for such bloody missions either. The fact that it was the Director's political judgment as much as anything else that held the CIA back was quickly forgotten after September 11.

While the CIA was locked in a tense internal stalemate about how to deal with Bin Laden, the hard-liners at the Agency found a forceful ally in Richard Clarke, the top counterterrorism official in the White House. Clarke was a secretive, acerbic workaholic who had been at the NSC since the Reagan era. He had grown increasingly alarmed about Al Qaeda by the year. In his safe was a copy of Cofer Black's Blue Sky Memo. In an effort to alert the new administration to the danger he saw, he wrote an impassioned jeremiad on January 25, 2001, essentially reprising Black's memo, titled "Strategy for Eliminating the Threat from Jihadist Networks of al Qaeda." Addressing this plea to Condoleezza Rice, Bush's new national security adviser, Clarke argued that the administration "urgently need[ed]" to "roll back" Al Qaeda. He warned that the terrorist group was not a secondary issue, as might be expected of a cult led by a medieval-seeming bearded zealot living in a mud hut half a world away, but a first-tier threat, operating in forty countries, including the United States. At the time, Clarke had no way of knowing that Mihdhar and Hazmi had already arrived in Los Angeles a few weeks earlier. But his

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report to Rice stated outright that Al Qaeda was known to have made inroads into America, utilizing "sleeper cells."

Clarke urged Rice to call a "Principals Meeting" of cabinet members whose portfolios dealt with national security, as soon as possible, to address Al Qaeda. He also urged the President to authorize "massive" covert military aid to the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. It seemed the best way to take on the rival Taliban, who were Al Qaeda's protectors in the region. Inevitably, this meant secretly authorizing these surrogates to kill Bin Laden. CLARKE
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But Rice scheduled no cabinet meeting on Al Qaeda. Instead, not long after receiving Clarke's memo, Rice demoted him in an organizational overhaul of the NSC, stripping him of a special privilege Clinton had bestowed on Clarke, allowing him to attend cabinet-level meetings on terrorism issues. Clarke had a mixed reputation—for brilliance, but also for devious bureaucratic gamesmanship. He knew as much about Islamic terrorism as anyone in the administration, but an aide to Rice said he'd been told to keep Clarke on a tight rein, because "He had a reputation for coloring outside the lines." In the tightly managerial and narrowly political Bush White House, Clarke was regarded with suspicion. In 2003, he resigned in frustration.

As U.S. policy toward Al Qaeda chugged its way slowly through mid-levels of the national security bureaucracy, Tenet claimed he kept up the pressure. In his first public congressional testimony as a member of the Bush Administration, in February 2001, Tenet later pointed out, he warned that Bin Laden and his associates posed "the most immediate and serious threat." Later, he testified before Congress again, warning that he considered a terrorist attack against the United States in the next two years "likely."

In March, Tenet's ambivalence was visible in a halfhearted effort to revive Black's aggressive Blue Sky Memo. Tenet gave a revised version of it to Rice's deputy, Stephen Hadley, again asking for broader legal latitude to kill Bin Laden. But Tenet later acknowledged that as he discussed it with Hadley, he agreed that first, before demanding this lethal authority, it made sense for the NSC to settle the administration's policy toward Al Qaeda. The NSC didn't want to take possession of the action plan at that point for political reasons—Hadley worried that along with possession would come responsibility for carrying the plan out, which the NSC didn't want. With Tenet's

blessing, the Blue Sky Memo was sent back to the CIA, set aside for another day. Clarke, meanwhile, railed against the CIA's "bi-polar mood swings" and "masterful passive-aggressive behavior."

By June, with the threat of attack against U.S. interests intensifying, Tenet directed particularly imperiled U.S. embassies to close. On July 10, Tenet said he was so alarmed by the mounting clues pointing to a monstrous impending attack against U.S. interests that it "literally made my hair stand on end." For the first and only time in his seven-year career at the helm of the CIA, he picked up the secure white phone in his office, with the direct line to Condoleezza Rice, and demanded an immediate, unscheduled meeting to talk about Al Qaeda.

Tenet said that he, Black, and a CIA Bin Laden expert, identified only as "Rich," confronted Rice in her office forcefully, arguing that the government had to stop playing defense and take immediate offensive action against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. They felt certain from warning signs they were seeing that the terrorist organization was on the verge of attack. "This country needs to go on a war footing, NOW!" Black boomed, according to Tenet. Black specifically said that Al Qaeda might "attack within the United States itself," according to an account of the meeting written by Bob Woodward.

Key details of the July 10 meeting have been disputed. Rice claimed she didn't recall any such urgency. Nor did she think that Tenet and his staff brought new information. She also denied anyone had told her that Bin Laden planned to attack America.

Complicating efforts to set the record straight was the fact that Tenet seemingly supplied two diametrically opposite accounts. In one account, given under oath to the 9/11 Commission prior to Tenet's departure from the Bush Administration, he praised Rice as having understood the gravity of the July 10 warning. "She got it," the notes from the 9/11 Commission quoted Tenet as saying. But after leaving the administration, Tenet appears to have given a far more critical account to Woodward. Rice is described as having given the CIA officials "the brush off." They felt "they were not getting through to her." They left feeling "frustrated."

Other top administration officials were also unmoved by the CIA's alarms in the days before 9/11. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy for intelligence, Stephen Cambone, were skeptical of the CIA's intercepts showing a celebratory mood in the Al Qaeda training camps and excited talk of a huge event about to happen. The CIA had listened with horror as Al Qaeda members wept on tearful

good-byes to one another a But Cambone and Deputy whom cast themselves as s lectuals, suggested it could

On August 6, the CIA's and the President. The CIA's identical Daily Briefing paper monthlong vacation at his "Bin Laden Determined to briefing himself. He visited barely spoke with Bush d memoir that while the alar Laden was intent on hittin have, and therefore did n ongoing plot."

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Tenet
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good-byes to one another and promised to see each other in Paradise. But Cambone and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, both of whom cast themselves as sophisticated neoconservative defense intellectuals, suggested it could just as easily be disinformation.

On August 6, the CIA's warnings indisputably reached both Rice and the President. The CIA delivered what became an infamous Presidential Daily Briefing paper, or PDB, to Bush, who was beginning a monthlong vacation at his ranch in Crawford, Texas. It was titled "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in the U.S." Tenet didn't deliver the briefing himself. He visited the ranch once that month but otherwise barely spoke with Bush during this period. Tenet admitted in his memoir that while the alarming-sounding report made clear that Bin Laden was intent on hitting America as hard as he could, "we did not have, and therefore did not convey, information about any specific ongoing plot."

Bush's reaction was reportedly dismissive. According to an account by journalist Ron Suskind in his book *The One Percent Doctrine*, after listening to the CIA's warning that day, the President responded, "All right. You've covered your ass now." HE WENT GOLFING!

Ten days later, after a flight school in Eagan, Minnesota, alerted the FBI that a belligerent French national of Moroccan descent with thousands of dollars in cash was insisting on being taught how to steer and navigate an airliner, but wasn't interested in finding out how to take off or land, Zacarias Moussaoui was arrested. Urgent memos from the FBI's Minneapolis field office to the Bureau's headquarters suggesting Moussaoui might be part of an attack using hijacked planes were ignored, and permission to search Moussaoui's laptop computer was denied. At the time, the FBI's assistant director for counterterrorism, Dale Watson, and Thomas Pickard, the acting Director of the FBI that summer, were trying to get more funding to fight Al Qaeda. But Attorney General John Ashcroft denied their pleas. Ashcroft, a social conservative whom Bush appointed as a favor to the evangelical wing of the Republican Party, which had helped him secure the thinnest of victory margins in the 2000 election, was far more interested in obliterating gun control and executing the Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh. According to Pickard, Ashcroft assailed him that summer for talking too much about the threat from Al Qaeda, angrily remonstrating, "I don't want to hear about that anymore!"

The news of Moussaoui's arrest took days to reach the top ranks of the sclerotic FBI, but it was shared almost immediately with Tenet at the

8/6/01
PDB

TO
WATER?

8/16/01

MOUSSAOUI

ASHCROFT
!!

FOR WATER?

CIA. An official with the 9/11 Commission said later that Tenet "says his hair is on fire . . . he gets information that they've captured Mousaoui in Minnesota. He actually gets that information. He gets the item in his daily briefing: a terrorist wants to learn to fly. They chuckle about it and move on. But no one is connecting these tactical fragments to the strategic warning they've all been yelling about. I mean, he'll go to a meeting that afternoon, and talk about how worried they all are."

On September 4, 2001, Clarke, who was still at the National Security Council, sent a last e-mail plea to Rice. She had finally scheduled a Principals Committee meeting that day on Al Qaeda. "Are we serious about dealing with the al Qida [*sic*] threat?" Clarke implored. "Decision makers should imagine themselves on a future day when the CSG has not succeeded in stopping al Qida attacks, and hundreds of Americans lay dead in several countries, including the U.S. What would those decision makers wish they had done earlier? That future day could happen any time."

That day, exactly one week before the terrorist attacks, the meeting of the Principals Committee of President Bush's national security advisers—a cabinet-level group that includes the Vice President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Director of the CIA, the National Security Adviser, the Attorney General, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—ended in a stalemate over taking more assertive action against Bin Laden. Movement was made toward arming the Northern Alliance. But no decision was made on the other issue at hand, whether to deploy a newly armed, unmanned drone aircraft, under development by the Air Force, against Bin Laden. Secret tests in the Nevada desert had succeeded in using the drone, known as the Predator, to destroy a model of Bin Laden's house. But neither the CIA nor the Air Force wanted to take the risk of using the Predator on a real mission against Bin Laden. Clarke, who attended the meeting, recalled that "Tenet said he opposed using the Predator because it wasn't the CIA's job to fly airplanes that shot missiles. And the Air Force said it wasn't their job to fly planes to collect intelligence. No one around the table seemed to have a can-do attitude. Everyone had an excuse." Roger Cressey, Clarke's deputy at the time, later admitted, "It sounds terrible, but we used to say to each other that some people didn't get it—it was going to take body bags."

Given this tragic history of missed opportunities, it is little wonder that swiftly, before anyone was in the frame of mind to call for public accountability, Tenet pinned the President down at Camp

David on the Saturday after Tenet wanted no investigation phrased this request adeptly had been doing a lot of hard try. It wasn't fair, he said, to Tenet portrayed it, this wanted to protect those bene off. They've saved thousands women who are doing the job believe in them," he said. "Le

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Several weeks later, on S promise. When a Republica mance, Bush rose to his rescue our team, and I'm not going courage Congress to frankly l job. And if he's not, blame m

Tenet was a natural politic been a holdover from the CL hadn't been sure about keepi been Director of the CIA hims Ford Administration, and Da senator from Oklahoma who Yale's elite secret society, Skul and career patron for Tenet, ha in place. In part, the elders th that intelligence is not suppo Tenet as a "straight shooter." I litical party Tenet leaned towa bational status, Tenet, who lov over. Soon, Bush came to like locker-room swagger. The son from the Queens borough of M Also, as a career staff member, Some at the Agency, however, tell the President what he wa wagging his tail and taggin "George?" said another. "His the Bush administration."

David on the Saturday after September 11 and exacted a promise. Tenet wanted no investigations into the CIA's record on Al Qaeda. He phrased this request adeptly, telling President Bush that his people had been doing a lot of hard things, risking their lives for their country. It wasn't fair, he said, to cast them under a cloud of suspicion. As Tenet portrayed it, this wasn't about protecting himself. He just wanted to protect those beneath him. "People are working their butts off. They've saved thousands of lives," he told Bush. "The men and women who are doing the job need to know that you, Mr. President, believe in them," he said. "Let's not get into 'the failure blame game.'"

On the spot, Bush gave Tenet his word. There would be no recriminations.

Several weeks later, on September 27, Bush made good on the promise. When a Republican congressman attacked Tenet's performance, Bush rose to his rescue, saying, "We cannot be second-guessing our team, and I'm not going to." The nation's at war. We need to encourage Congress to frankly leave the man alone. Tenet's doing a good job. And if he's not, blame me, not him." *TRADERS!*

Tenet was a natural politician. He and Bush got along well. He'd been a holdover from the Clinton Administration, and at first Bush hadn't been sure about keeping him on. But Bush's father, who had been Director of the CIA himself for slightly less than a year during the Ford Administration, and David Boren, the conservative Democratic senator from Oklahoma who, like the Bushes, had been a member of Yale's elite secret society, Skull and Bones, and who had been a mentor and career patron for Tenet, had both urged the President to keep Tenet in place. In part, the elders thought it important to send the message that intelligence is not supposed to be political. Also, they regarded Tenet as a "straight shooter." Boren said he didn't even know what political party Tenet leaned toward. After getting what amounted to probational status, Tenet, who loved his job, worked hard at winning Bush over. Soon, Bush came to like Tenet's gregarious unpretentiousness and locker-room swagger. The son of Greek immigrant coffee-shop owners from the Queens borough of New York, Tenet was a self-made success. Also, as a career staff member, he had a gift for pleasing powerful bosses. Some at the Agency, however, scorned what they saw as his eagerness to tell the President what he wanted to hear. "He was like a puppy-dog, wagging his tail and tagging along," said one former CIA officer. "George?" said another. "His greatest wish was to hold onto his job in the Bush administration."

*IS THAT
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NO ONE
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A foreign ambassador whose country worked closely with the Bush Administration against terrorism was astonished by what he called "a conspiracy of silence on the part of the political leaders of both parties in Washington" after September 11. "What strikes an outsider is how quiet George Bush and Bill Clinton were about each other, too." He added, "There's no need to punish people for legitimate differences of opinion about how serious the threat was from Al Qaeda before 9/11. But, you need to understand what went wrong. They didn't want to identify that. If people were grossly negligent, or intellectually lazy, or showed terrible judgment, then something should be done about it, so that there is accountability, and a learning process. It didn't happen here."

Vice President Cheney threw his considerable political clout into an effort to kill any independent, full-bore investigation, warning Democratic Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle in 2002 that if he persisted in calling for such a probe, the White House would ensure that the Democrats were portrayed as undermining the war on terror. Given public sentiment at the time, it was a brass-knuckle threat. But Daschle persisted, strengthened immeasurably by the support of Republican senator John McCain, who, fresh from having been smeared by the Bush camp in his 2000 race for the presidency, was more than happy to expose the administration's flaws.

In Bush's decision to protect his national security team, some might see the personal loyalty for which he was known. Others might see a characteristic resistance to intellectual rigor and empirical fact-finding. Self-analysis or, as Bush derided it, being "put on the couch" was not his style. Critics, however, could suggest an ulterior motive. Like Tenet, Rice, Ashcroft, and the FBI's top officials, Bush had little to gain, and much to lose, from too close a look at his record on terrorism prior to September 11.

2! — During the 2000 presidential campaign, Bush never publicly mentioned Bin Laden or Al Qaeda, nor had the Republican platform made fighting the terrorist organization a policy plank. Bush, whose lack of international experience was considered a political liability, stumbled on a cheap-shot question from a reporter challenging him to name Pakistan's president, General Pervez Musharraf. "The new Pakistani general, he's just been elected—not elected, this guy took over office. It appears this guy is going to bring stability to the country and I think that's good news for the subcontinent," Bush ventured when the name eluded him. Separately, when asked by a *Glamour* magazine

reporter what he thought of the women—in Afghanistan," Bush gave some band. The Taliban in Afghanistan

After taking office, Bush called Bin Laden prior to the session. In fact, the 9/11 Commission reviewed Presidential Daily Briefings from August 28 and September 10, 2001. But that Bush's attention span was so short who he said "would drill down" that Cheney was the detail guy. A lot of people hate him. He's the one spinning the wheel." In contrast, he spent small increments of time—thirty minutes—so he was distracted.

reporter what he thought of the Taliban, Bush at first drew a blank. When the reporter offered a hint, "Because of the repression of women—in Afghanistan," Bush caught on. "Oh! I thought you said some band. The Taliban in Afghanistan. Absolutely. Repressive."

After taking office, Bush certainly was briefed by the CIA about Bin Laden prior to the session at his Texas ranch in August 2001. In fact, the 9/11 Commission revealed that he received more than forty Presidential Daily Briefings mentioning Bin Laden between January and September 10, 2001. But a witness to some of these briefings said that Bush's attention span was strikingly different from that of Cheney, who he said "would drill down" on national security information. "Cheney was the detail guy. And Cheney doesn't care how many people hate him. He's the one senior guy who had his hands on the steering wheel." In contrast, he said, "Bush was different. He had such small increments of time—they'd schedule him in five-minute increments—so he was distracted."

40 PDBs
start Sept 10
BIN LADEN