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How Much Do US Presidents Know about Terror? Part I

May 17, 2002

How Much Do US Presidents Know about Terror?

First Part of **DEBKAFfile** Special Report, 17 May, 2002

On January 8, 1998, 33 months before the September 11 disasters, Islamic fundamentalist Ramzi Yousuf was sentenced by a Manhattan court to 240 years solitary confinement, a \$4.5 m fine and \$250 m in restitution for perpetrating the first terrorist attack on New York's WorldTradeCenter in February 1993. Six Americans died in that attack and more than a thousand were injured. Yusef, today 32, continues to languish in a special penal installation in Manhattan together with some of his accomplices. The best known is the "Blind Sheikh" Abdul Rahman, who as a hard-core member of the violent Egyptian Jihad Islami, was a co-planner of the assassination of President Anwar Sadat in October 1981 in Cairo.

The trial records shed instructive light on al Qaeda's objectives and methods:

1. Yousuf regarded his mission as a fiasco. The location of the truck he drove into the parking area underneath one of the towers - and the size of the explosive charge it carried - were mathematically calculated to force one of the two towers to lean over and slam into the second one. This one blast was to have brought the two towers crashing down, killing many thousands of Americans.

2. One year later, Yousuf, still at large, was in the Philippines. He was part of a group that plotted the hijack from Far Eastern airfields of 12 Boeing 747 airliners bound for the US. They were to be blown up over 12 American cities, including New York and Washington. At least 4,000 people aboard those flights would have died, not counting the casualties on the ground.

That revelation alone indicated extensive forward planning: aviation training had been organized for tens of terrorists to fly large airliners into American airspace and blow them up over predetermined targets, one of them New York.

These two revelations were on the court record seven and eight years before Osama bin Laden's suicide hijackers hit New York and Washington.

Therefore, the US president's national security adviser Condoleezza Rice was only technically correct when she stressed at her meeting with the press on Thursday, May 16, that there was no way anyone could have predicted that international terrorists would use hijacked planes as missiles and attack the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. She added that the briefing received by the president "mentioned hijacking, but hijacking in the traditional sense... the most likely thing was that they would take over an airliner, holding passengers and demand the release of one of their operatives. And the blind sheikh was mentioned by name..."

At the same time, when all the information accumulated by US and foreign intelligence agencies over the preceding seven years is put together, it is hard to believe that none of the security and political professionals missed the warning signals marking out the road to September 11, 2001.

Ever since the Yousuf trial, Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda network were known to be plotting mischief against America, targeting the World Trade as its outstanding emblem; known to be training pilots for suicide missions in America. Yet White House spokesman Ari Fleischer, who spoke to the media several hours before Rice, insisted the information received in the White House in August 2001, one month before the attacks, was generalized and non-specific.

Facing a barrage of questions, he said "The president did not receive information about the use of airplanes as missiles by suicide bombers. This was a new type of attack that had not been foreseen. As a result, a series of changes and improvements have been made in the way the United States deals with a terrorist threat."

He rebuked one questioner: "...you are using the post-September 11th knowledge of what a hijacking could be and applying it to August, prior to September 11th."

In answer to another question, Fleischer quoted from a speech made in April at DukeUniversity by Jim Pavitt, deputy director of operations for the CIA:

"We had very, very good intelligence on the general structure and strategies of the al Qaeda terrorist organization. We knew and were warned that al Qaeda was planning a major strike.

We never found the tactical intelligence, never uncovered the specifics that could

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have stopped those tragic strikes...The terror cells that we're going up against are typically small, and all terrorist personnel in those cells, participating in those cells, perpetrating the acts of terror – all those personnel were carefully screened. The number of personnel who knew vital information – targets, timing, the exact methods to be used – had to be smaller still."

Fleischer clearly drew on the words of this senior CIA officer to support his contention that all terror warnings are general by definition because the United States has never come up with tactical intelligence on al Qaeda. Without such intelligence, the president cannot be expected to "connect the dots", the fragments of data provided by intelligence bodies, into pinpointed, comprehensive advance knowledge, when that data is too general even for the CIA to construe al Qaeda's methods of operation.

Whatever is expected of the president in the way of tactical predictions, the arguments voiced by Fleischer - and through him by Pavitt - betray one basic fact: to this day, eight months after the traumas of 11/9, the United States remains vulnerable to al Qaeda terrorist assaults, prevented by lack of tactical intelligence from building up a complete tactical picture of the enemy. This is still true five months after the United States brought down the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and stripped al Qaeda of its main territorial base, a situation that poses two questions:

A. Why is the United States, despite having the most powerful, sophisticated and affluent intelligence bodies in the world, whose annual budget runs into \$30b, short of the tactical intelligence necessary for waging a war on terror?

B. How come that a terrorist organization with a hard core numbering no more than 3,000-5,000 members commands better tactical intelligence than the United States as well as a counterintelligence capability effective enough to fend off hostile penetration?

CIA officer Pavitt explained the two anomalies by the theory that al Qaeda cells are extremely small, hinting at its ultra-tight compartmentalization and a degree of ethnic and religious homogeneity that makes their ranks virtually impermeable.

That theory was one of the first casualties of the Afghanistan War, where fighters of many nations, including Americans, British, Frenchmen and Russians, were found to be fighting with al Qaeda. The American John Walker awaits trial at a detention facility in Alexandria, WashingtonDC, while diverse nationals are held at the CampX-Ray center in Guantanamo.

In other words, had US intelligence wanted to plant undercover agents in the Islamic terror network, it would not have been impossible.

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