



# TROUBLED 9/11 TALES

Near misses and  
blown opportunities

BY CHITRA RAGAVAN

It was late 1999 when satellites belonging to the supersecret National Security Agency picked up some alarming chatter in Pakistan and Yemen. The talk was among three men who used only their first names: Nawaf, Khalid, and Salem. Intelligence officials quickly concluded the men were plotting “something nefarious.” They launched a global search for the trio but never picked up their trail. It wasn’t until Sept. 11, 2001, that the feds figured out what the men had been plotting. Khalid Almihdar and the other men, brothers Nawaf and Salem Alhazmi, turned out to be three of the 19 hijackers on 9/11.

Last week, an independent bipartisan commission investigating the attacks revealed a series of failures at virtually every level of the federal security bureaucracies. “There were many opportunities to stop the 9/11 plot,” said a commissioner, former Deputy Attorney General Jamie Gorelick. But a colleague, former Washington Sen. Slade Gorton, disagrees. The terrorists, he says, “flat out beat us.”

The commission’s revelations are part of a more complex picture that has its origins in the first attack on the World Trade Center, the 1993 truck bombing by radical Islamic fundamentalists. FBI agents ultimately arrested the key people responsible and later penetrated another cell of Islamic radicals planning to blow up New York City landmarks. But despite such successes, the insular universe that terrorists inhabit has remained largely impenetrable. Why? A combination of luck—and time. A decade ago, it took the FBI and the New York Police Department just a few days to catch three key conspirators in the World Trade Center bombing because they had been shadowing the men responsible for *five* years. Soon after, an FBI informant unearthed another plot by men with ties to the 1993 blast to blow up New York tunnels and bridges,

out in his testimony, just about everybody got it wrong, including antiwar nations like France and Germany, which also thought that Iraq possessed banned weapons. Kay’s critique of the intelligence community’s performance is hard to argue with, especially his criticism of the CIA’s inability to develop human sources to penetrate Saddam’s regime. Instead, analysts were forced to rely heavily on circumstantial evidence, in particular Iraq’s efforts to deceive U.S. intelligence and its inability to account for its weapons.

Still, in reviewing the intelligence, there was contradictory evidence that analysts simply ignored because it was contrary to their assumptions. “They had various reporting from different sources through time that in retrospect people will say should have raised more questions,” says one intelligence official.

**Deception.** Ironically, Kay and others now believe that Iraq may actually have destroyed its WMD arsenal in the 1990s, just as the regime claimed. After years of confronting Saddam’s deceit, this is still difficult for many intelligence analysts to accept. “If we had voiced some of these things around the table, we would have been laughed out of the room,” says Thielmann.

Another possibility that Kay offered is that Iraqi scientists might have been lying to Saddam, claiming progress to

assuage his ambitions. There were hints of such deceit dating back to the Persian Gulf War. Gordon Oehler, the CIA’s liaison to the U.N. inspectors at the time, tells *U.S. News* how one top defector tied to the nuclear program described Iraq’s dramatic progress in building a bomb, forcing the CIA to revise its estimates. But the CIA soon realized the scientists were simply making it up. “All the people he talked to were lying through their teeth,” Oehler says. “[The program] was much bigger than we thought, but it wasn’t making more progress than we thought.” The intelligence estimate, though, was not revised back.

Wherever the blame ultimately falls, many in Washington fear that U.S. credibility has been damaged in the fight against terrorism and WMD proliferation, especially when it comes to countries like North Korea. At the very least, it will impede the Bush administration’s new doctrine of pre-emptive war. “If you are going to go on a preventive war, you need to know with a reasonable certainty that they have the weaponry and that you know where it is,” says David Isenberg at BASIC, a national security think tank. “What Iraq shows us is that we can’t do that currently.” ●

*With Bruce Auster, David E. Kaplan, and Mark Mazzetti*

the United Nations, and the FBI's New York office. In 1997, the FBI questioned and placed under surveillance Wadhi el-Hage, Osama bin Laden's personal secretary. But it was only after the fact that agents realized Hage was a key planner of the October 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Hage and bin Laden's security planners scouted the embassy locations; both had ties to the 1993 bombers as well.

**Ties that bind.** A review of the major terrorism investigations of the past decade shows that many of the plotters had ties to one another and that federal investigators were repeatedly hanging around in the right investigative neighborhoods watching the right guys. Key intelligence sources directly involved in the embassy bombings gave vital clues that led to that NSA intercept in 1999 of conversations between Almihtar and the Alhazmi brothers. In early January 2000, the three men hooked up with Khallad Bin Attash (aka Walid Attash), the orchestrator of the bombing of the USS Cole nine months later. Attash may have given the men some money to plan the 9/11 attacks—the same attacks that brought investigators full circle back to 1993. The mastermind of 9/11 was a key bin Laden associate, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed. His nephew Ramzi Yousef directed the 1993 World Trade Center attack. Mohammed had given Yousef a measly \$600 for the plot. After fleeing the United States, Yousef moved to Manila, where

he plotted an attempt on Pope John Paul II's life and the bombings of as many as 12 airliners over the Pacific Ocean. Nearly a decade later, using planes as giant fuel-laden bombs, Yousef's uncle, Mohammed, finished what his nephew had started.

Federal investigators and intelligence officials had inklings of the links among the terrorists. Between 1995 and 2001, the U.S. government had no fewer than six specific intelligence reports about the possibility of Islamic terrorists plotting plane crashes into buildings, says commissioner Timothy Roemer, a former Indiana congressman. In July 2001, the Federal Aviation Administration stated in the *Federal Register* that there was an "increasing threat" to civil aviation

from terrorist hijackings. In a slide show prepared for airline executives a year earlier, the FAA warned that Islamic fundamentalists might hijack planes to commit spectacular suicide attacks. "The dots are connected. And they're large. And they're looming," Roemer told federal officials during the commission's public hearings last week. "Why no change in policy?"

Experts cite a host of reasons: bu-

help either. When he asked the bureau about hijacking risks, Flynn recalls, he was told, "there are none." Airport screeners, Flynn adds, were also "under very strict guidelines not to pick someone solely on the basis of ethnicity." And Saudi travelers were given undue deference (15 of the 19 hijackers on 9/11 were from Saudi Arabia).

So, despite poorly forged passports, incomplete visa applications replete with easily disprovable false statements, blatant violations of immigration laws, and, in at least two instances, known ties to terrorist groups, the 19 hijackers received 23 visas and traveled to the United States at least 33 times. Consular officers interviewed several of the hijackers before granting visas; customs and immigration inspectors questioned them; and an FAA computer prescreening program targeted nine for additional luggage searches. In reality, however, the 19 hijackers had to get by only one layer of security screening, at the X-ray checkpoints. At least three hijackers did set off alarms and were hand searched. Still, the hijackers boarded with permissible utility knives and pocketknives and banned substances like Mace or pepper spray products used to subdue passengers and crew.

Against this bleak tableau, at least one tale of law enforcement vigilance emerged. Last week, immigration inspector Jose Melendez-Perez told the commission how he stopped Mohamed al Kahtani at Orlando International Airport on Aug. 4, 2001. Al Kahtani had no return ticket or hotel reservations and refused to identify a friend he said was waiting for him, who may have been the 9/11 ringleader, Mohamed Atta. "It's extremely plausible and perhaps probable," says commissioner Richard Benveniste, a former Watergate prosecutor, "that Mohamed al Kahtani was to have been the 20th hijacker." Supervisors backed Melendez-Perez and put al Kahtani on a plane back to Dubai; he soon turned up in Afghanistan. "The bottom line," Melendez-Perez says, "was he gave me the creeps." ●

With Samantha Levine  
Ragavanc@usnews.com



**HITS AND MISSES.** Inspector Jose Melendez-Perez (above) confronted a potential 9/11 hijacker. Intercepts picked up chatter between Khalid Almihtar (below left) and brothers Salem (middle) and Nawaf Alhazmi (right) in late 1999. They were among the 9/11 hijackers.



reaucratic inertia, a lack of intelligence sharing, and a deep ambivalence toward immigration reform. In addition, said commissioner and former Navy Secretary John Lehman, the nation's airlines displayed a "childlike faith" in the government's ability to sniff out attacks. The FAA's inordinate focus on bombs in the face of all the evidence pointing to hijackings also created an "easily manipulated and gameable" aviation system, says Roemer. For instance, the FAA's former security chief, Adm. Cathal "Irish" Flynn, said he was utterly "unaware" that the State Department had a TIPOFF list of 61,000 suspected terrorists. The FAA's own "no fly" list contained just 12 names. The FBI's recalcitrance didn't