

Did the Terrorist Attacks of 11 September 2001 Confirm the Thesis that “Intelligence Failures are Inevitable”?

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Abstract:

While intelligence failure was a contributory cause of the September 11 (9/11) attacks, it was not the sole cause. Although it failed to provide plot-specific tactical warnings, the US Intelligence Community (IC) did provide political and strategic warnings to policymakers. Having warned policymakers at two out of three warning phases, one can argue that the overall performance of the IC was not a failure; at best, it qualifies but does not confirm the thesis that “intelligence failure is inevitable.” Surprise was as much a policy response failure as it was a tactical warning failure. In this light, 9/11 instead validates the thesis that “strategic surprise is inevitable.”

Keywords: 9/11; Surprise and Intelligence Failure; Terrorist Attacks; Tactical Warning

INTRODUCTION

The proverbial goalkeeper in a penalty shootout is in an unenviable position—there will be few praises for goal saving, but all-round condemnation when the team loses. Such was the situation for the US Intelligence Community (IC) when terrorists attacked its homeland on 11 September 2001 (9/11). As the esteemed English poet Alexander Pope once said, “to err is human.” Given that the IC has to grapple with the imperfections of its collectors and analysts in addition to oversights inherent in all complex organizations, “the opportunities for mistakes are almost unlimited,”¹ and there seems a case for the thesis that “intelligence failures are inevitable.”

Yet, in the context of 9/11, the application of this thesis needs to be judicious. Undeniably, 9/11 constituted a failure, but the character of the failure is equivocal because “many things went wrong in many places and at many levels, making the exact problems hard to pinpoint, diffusing responsibility and obscuring the path ahead.”² There is an analytical need to distinguish intelligence failures from surprise attacks—the former is a cause, while the latter is a consequence. To determine whether 9/11 confirms the thesis that “intelligence failures are inevitable,” there

is a need to uncover evidence of intelligence failure, ascertain the extent these failures led to surprise, and establish whether there were other causal factors.

While intelligence failure was a contributory cause of the 9/11 attacks, intelligence failure did not by itself cause the surprise. This is because the IC did provide political and strategic warnings to policymakers, although it failed to provide plot-specific tactical warnings. Having warned policymakers at two out of three warning phases, one can argue that the overall performance of the IC was not a failure; at best, it qualifies but does not confirm the thesis “intelligence failure is inevitable,” especially considering the



Collapse of the World Trade Centre During the September 11 Terrorist Attacks in New York City

epistemological question of whether it is possible to uncover the “mystery” of terror plans when confronted with an innovative and suicidal enemy intent on fulfilling the duty “to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military.”³ Surprise was as much a policy response failure as it was a tactical warning failure. In this light, 9/11 instead validates the thesis “strategic surprise is inevitable.”

This essay will first examine the theoretical underpinnings of surprise attacks and intelligence failures before proceeding to discuss the IC’s performance at providing political, strategic and tactical warnings for the terror attacks *vis-à-vis* policymakers’ response. It will conclude with a normative discussion on the inevitability of intelligence failure.

SURPRISE AND INTELLIGENCE FAILURE

Anything unanticipated may result in surprise, although not all surprises have the magnitude and scale of 9/11. Surprise attacks are defined in terms of the victim’s lack of preparation in relation to whether, when, where, and how the enemy will strike.⁴ This unprepared state may be a consequence of several factors.

First, intelligence failure, which may arise from the following: collection failure due to the inability to obtain relevant and timely information, such as the IC’s failure to gather information on the time, target and type of the 9/11 attacks; analytical failure due to misjudgement or failure to connect various disparate information into actionable intelligence;



Below-Waterline Damage to the USS Cole

and communication failure between and within intelligence agencies, such as the failure of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to have the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) place Al-Mihdhar and Al-Hazmi on the watch-list.⁵

With reference to surprise attacks and given that “the ultimate object of intelligence is to enable action to be optimized by reducing ignorance,”⁶ intelligence failure may be conceptualized as failure to warn. There are three stages of warning: first, political warning, which “comes from the increase in tension that raises the possibility that deterrence can fail”; second, strategic warning, which “comes from indications that the enemy is mobilizing and deploying forces in dispositions consistent with a plan to attack”; and third, tactical warning, which is “the detection of the initial movements of the attack itself.”⁷ Each warning stage is a response to developing enemy intentions and capabilities. A failure to provide warning at any stage may lead to surprise.

Second, despite accurate and timely warning, surprise may still occur if policymakers do not respond adequately to foil enemy intentions and disrupt their capabilities. In other words, “warning without response is useless.”⁸ Here, response is defined as actions aimed at preventing attacks, which may include passive (e.g. mobilization and readiness alert manning) and active measures (e.g. covert and overt military actions). This essay will show that both the Clinton and Bush administrations failed to respond to the developing Al-Qaeda threat, thereby contributing to surprise.

Third, surprise may occur through neither the fault of the IC nor policymakers because the attacks were a mystery. Here, one needs to differentiate secrets from mysteries. Intelligence is secret information required by policymakers for the purposes of furthering national security interests.⁹ Secrets are information within the collection capability of the IC. A mystery, on the other hand, is information that is unknowable.¹⁰ For instance, the IC cannot be reasonably expected to collect information that only exists within the minds of terrorists.

In the case of 9/11, Al-Qaeda leaders actively prevented information leaks on the attacks through “compartmentation”—clandestine planning by a specially selected cell of operatives with no known terrorist credentials who kept all deliberations beyond the eavesdropping capabilities of the IC. In fact, Osama bin-Laden disclosed that he only revealed details of the plan to the hijackers on the morning of the attack, thereby ensuring that none could betray the plot.¹¹

Armed with the above theoretical foundation, this essay will adopt the three stages of warning framework to discuss the extent to which the IC failed to prevent 9/11. It will use this framework to test the thesis “intelligence failures are inevitable.”

POLITICAL WARNING: WARNING SUCCESS, RESPONSE FAILURE

One function of intelligence is the production of knowledge through the collection and analysis of secret information, in order to predict likely future scenarios for national security policymaking.¹² The IC fulfilled this function through providing policymakers political warning of US homeland vulnerability to terror attacks.

The IC had steadily highlighted terrorism as a significant threat to national security since 1994; in 1998, terrorism was ranked as a top-tier threat; and in February 2001, Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), George Tenet, briefed the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that “Osama bin Laden and his global network of lieutenants and associates remain the most immediate and serious threat.”¹³ The 2002 Congressional Joint Inquiry and the 9/11 Commission recognized that the IC had delivered persistent political warnings to both the Clinton and Bush administration.

In fact, the IC’s warnings successfully placed terrorism high on the political agenda. For instance, from 1994 onwards, President Clinton included terrorism in all of his State of the Union addresses;

in 1995, Clinton was the first world leader to call for a global counter-terrorist effort at the United Nations (UN), a call repeated in 1998; in 1996, Clinton ranked terrorism as the top national security challenge.¹⁴

However, political declarations do not equate to response, and it was a lack of effective response that allowed the threat to actualise. First, in terms of active response, the futile 20 August 1998 cruise missile strikes on the Khowst training camp and the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant, as well as the lacklustre response to the *USS Cole* suicide attack, perhaps signalled to bin-Laden that attacking US targets “were risk free.”¹⁵

Second, the prevailing law enforcement approach towards dealing with Al-Qaeda achieved only limited success—a notable example was the arrest of Zacarias Moussaoui (the alleged twentieth hijacker) in August 2001. This was because policymakers failed to meld the instruments of national power; diplomatic, military and economic, to counter the threat. For instance, the failure to adopt a more active response, such as the elimination of Al-Qaeda safe-havens in Afghanistan and the seizure of known terrorist financial sources, enabled Al-Mihdhar, Al-Hazmi and the Hamburg group to receive training in Afghanistan and wire the funds used to carry out the attacks into the US unhindered. There was also no coherent

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diplomatic counter-terrorism policy *vis-à-vis* Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which in hindsight, was central to combating Al-Qaeda.¹⁶ In short, policymaker risk aversion and adherence to accepted norms of international behaviour, in the face of an enemy which rejected and broke those norms, permitted perpetrators the space and time to plan, recruit, train and execute the attacks, while ensuring that its masterminds remained beyond the jurisdiction of international justice.¹⁷

Third, in terms of passive response, President Clinton refrained from specifying Al-Qaeda in all his pronouncements on terrorism to avoid giving Osama bin-Laden unnecessary publicity and enhancing the group’s stature.¹⁸ However, this had the unintended



The Aftermath of the August 1998 Al-Qaeda Suicide Bombing of the US Embassy in Tanzania

consequence of not alerting the American public to the specificity, immediacy and severity of the threat.¹⁹ Thus, when the attacks happened, the surprise was magnified by public ignorance, in spite of the IC's political warnings.

An examination of the political warning level-of-analysis reveals that the thesis "intelligence failure is inevitable" does not apply. This conclusion undermines the common view that surprise attacks occur because of warning failure. On the contrary, it corroborates the observation that in most cases of strategic surprise, leaders of the victim-state were warned, but failed to respond in ways that hindsight reveals were necessary.²⁰

This is an important revelation because in post-9/11 attempts at rationalising the tragedy, the attacks have frequently been cast as an intelligence failure—the result of the IC's organizational and adaptation failure.²¹ Such arguments imply that surprise can be avoided through systemic and procedural reforms within the IC. As this study has shown, such a belief is illusory and dangerous.²² While such reforms may bring about marginal improved predictions, they do not address the political causes of surprises.

STRATEGIC WARNING: WARNING SUCCESS, RESPONSE FAILURE

A distinguishing feature of Al-Qaeda's jihadist-terrorism is its loose global network of religiously-inspired terror cells, which intentionally and routinely target civilian populations to produce mass casualties.²³ When extremist aims are coupled with

rapid technological change, the terrorist-innovator possesses the critical unilateral advantage of surprise.²⁴ In this light, the IC becomes the nation's first line of defence by providing strategic warning.

In the case of 9/11, the IC served its role with strategic warnings of an impending attack on the homeland. For instance, in the first eight months of 2001, more than forty Al-Qaeda reports were presented at the President's Daily Brief (PDB); in that spring, terrorist threat warnings to policymakers reached a crescendo, with several reports of attacks planned for the homeland, notably the 6 August PDB which included an article entitled "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in US."²⁵ Of import, both the 2002 Congressional Joint Inquiry and the 9/11 Commission noted that the IC's strategic warning systems were "blinking red,"²⁶ that it had warned of attacks with "dramatic consequences on governments or [causing] major casualties," and that the attack would "occur with little or no warning."²⁷

Again, these strategic warnings were not matched by appropriate responses. Here, the Bush administration's response failure may be analysed at two levels. Firstly, a perception failure, which led to the underestimation of the existential threat Al-Qaeda posed.²⁸ This was in part driven by the belief that the homeland was safe;²⁹ after all, Al-Qaeda attacks against US interests had taken place in Africa and the Middle East, and the 1993 World Trade Centre (WTC) bombing (with six dead) was a distant memory.

Furthermore, there existed "preconceived mind-sets" amongst senior Bush officials, which interpreted intelligence data according to what they "[wanted] to see."³⁰ For example, when presented with reports on the Al-Qaeda threat prior to 9/11, Deputy Defence Secretary, Paul Wolfowitz, accused the Chair of the Counterterrorism Security Group (CSG), Richard Clarke, of giving bin-Laden "too much credit," insisting that there had to be a state sponsor, and asserted, "just because FBI and CIA have failed to find the linkages does not mean they do not exist."³¹

Consequently, the Bush administration did not prioritize terrorism as highly as the Clinton administration had. For instance, the CSG was downgraded from reporting directly to the principals

to their deputies, the principals meeting to discuss counter-terrorism for the first time only a week before the attacks happened—eight months after the administration was established.³²

This lack of priority is a reflection of the failure of the Bush administration's prioritization process in general. The government "wanted to know everything about everything all the time," which further encumbered the overburdened IC; for instance, the NSA was given 1,500 formal requirements (this translated into 200,000 "Essential Elements of Information") prior to 9/11, covering virtually every situation and target.³³ Given that the intelligence cycle begins with "planning and direction" by policymakers, such lack of focus causes failures because limited resources cannot cope with insatiable demands.

Secondly, this cognitive disjuncture was corroborated by political failure where the IC's strategic warnings were either ignored or responses delayed.³⁴ This explains the limited attention given to homeland counter-terrorism defensive measures under the Bush administration.³⁵ For example, before 9/11, policymakers decided against enhancing aviation security because the costs and potential negative repercussions of these defensive measures were high.³⁶

Additionally, both the State and Defence Departments failed to adequately act on the strategic warnings. The State Department's diplomatic efforts were largely ineffective and the Defence Department was not tasked to deal with Al-Qaeda Afghan sanctuaries; both Departments were never fully engaged in the mission of countering Al-Qaeda, although this was arguably the most dangerous threat.³⁷ This was in stark contrast to the efforts of the CIA, which was highlighted in the 9/11 Commission to have worked tirelessly and done more than any other department to counter the threat worldwide. Even though the IC could not produce tactical intelligence of the attack, what it did submit to policymakers

should have been sufficient to urge a response to heighten alert and implement additional defensive measures.³⁸

In sum, the IC can only lead the policy horse to water but cannot compel it to drink. Again, this study of strategic warning does not confirm the thesis that "intelligence failure is inevitable," but substantiates the role policymaker response failure plays in contributing to surprise attacks. Evidently, the IC did well in warning policymakers on why and what Al-Qaeda aimed to achieve. Yet, as the next section will show, it failed to provide plot-specific intelligence on the where, when and how of the attacks.

TACTICAL WARNING: INTELLIGENCE FAILURE

The IC's primary counter-terrorism role is to provide early warning to pre-empt, prevent and disrupt terror attacks, as well as highlight key vulnerabilities for remedy.³⁹ The fact that a surprise attack on an undefended target took place suggests that the IC had to a certain extent, failed in its counter-terrorism mission.

Given that the intelligence cycle begins with "planning and direction" by policymakers, such lack of focus causes failures because limited resources cannot cope with insatiable demands.

This failure was an amalgamation of collection failure (e.g. both the FBI and CIA failed to capitalize on the arrest of Zacarias Moussaoui and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, a.k.a. "Mukhtar," to obtain information on Al-Qaeda intentions and capabilities); analytical failure (e.g. CIA failure to link "Mukhtar" with Ramzi Binalshibh and Moussaoui, and FBI failure to connect Al-Mihdhar, Al-Hazmi, and Moussaoui); and communication failure (e.g. CIA failure to watch-list and track Al-Mihdhar and Al-Hazmi or notify the FBI that both possessed multiple-entry visas and had Al-Qaeda links, and the inter-agency failure to share information with the USS Cole investigators).⁴⁰

Hence, this tactical warning failure constitutes an intelligence failure because, although the specific details of the plot remained a mystery, the Commission and Inquiry reported that had the above secrets been pursued deeper through collection, connected through

analysis and communicated between agencies, more secrets surrounding the mystery could have been uncovered. The assumption here is that the revealing of these secrets could have at least disrupted the plot if not pre-empt or prevent it.

Of note, the failure occurred in spite of redirected resources to combat terrorism (e.g. direct spending on counter-terrorism roughly quintupled despite post-Cold War tightening of intelligence budgets);⁴¹ reorganization within the IC to create special units specifically focussed on the Al-Qaeda threat;⁴² and IC leadership emphasis on the terrorism threat (in December 1998, DCI Tenet issued a directive to his senior officials, stating, “we are at war. I want no resources or people spared in this effort, either inside CIA or the Community”).⁴³ That failure resulted in spite of the above measures suggests that intelligence failures are inevitable.

WAS 9/11 AN INEVITABLE INTELLIGENCE FAILURE?

Eminent scholars studying the phenomenon of surprise attacks have reached the conclusion that intelligence failures are inevitable; 9/11 is no exception. First, Intelligence will fail due to human error. This is in spite of the latest technological advances because the problems innate in the human factor remain: “human psychology and politics; wishful thinking; ethnocentric biases; perception and misperception of reality; conflicting interests; political competition over scarce resources; organizational biases.”⁴⁴

Second, the organizational complexity of the IC worsens this human condition because bureaucratic hierarchy causes signals to be lost or filtered out. Like human imperfection, organizational failures may be improved at the margins but cannot be completely eradicated.⁴⁵ This explains recurring surprises despite attempts at systemic improvement.

Thirdly, the function of intelligence as knowledge is problematic. Hindsight offers crystal clear vision to aid separation of noise from signals, but before the event, signals are “obscure and pregnant with conflicting meanings.”⁴⁶ Moreover, penetrating the mind of a vigilant and meticulous terrorist to unveil the mysteries of his plot is near impossible. This is especially so when language, ethnic and religious barriers hinder the IC from infiltrating terrorist cells.

Lastly, in the secret world of intelligence, one man’s intelligence failure is another’s counter-intelligence success. Al-Qaeda is an artful and sophisticated military organization that employs inventive tactics and exploits modern communications.⁴⁷ For instance, the nineteen hijackers entered the US legally, behaved inconspicuously and camouflaged their “carefully planned and brilliantly executed suicide attack that took full advantage of US technology and openness as a society.”⁴⁸

That said, in the context of 9/11, to proffer the notion that intelligence failure is inevitable gives the false impression that surprise can be blamed on intelligence failure alone. As argued, policymakers’ response failure played a pivotal role too. Furthermore, focusing on intelligence failure generates a distorted view of endemic dereliction of duty within the IC, when in objective reality intelligence success was indeed prevalent.⁴⁹ In fact, the true surprise was that there had not been any major attacks prior to 9/11.⁵⁰

As such, this essay submits that a more useful lens through which to study the 9/11 terrorist attacks is the thesis “surprise attacks are inevitable.” This is because the factors that make intelligence failures inevitable also apply to policy makers and security forces. Moreover, intelligence failures frequently occur but not all lead to devastating and tragic outcomes. Thus, focussing on the consequences of failure rather than its component causes better allows students of surprise attacks to appreciate their complex, polycephalous and non-linear nature.

While it is prudent to acknowledge that intelligence will fail, and to erect defensive measures to survive and recover quickly from surprise, a more constructive mantra for the IC to adopt is “intelligence failures are not inevitable,” and to continue the good work at providing warnings.

From a normative perspective, to expect the IC to predict and prevent all surprises is unreasonable.⁵¹ This is because the IC has been traditionally organized and tasked to acquire secrets from state-based targets, rather than unclassified but inaccessible mysteries from globally-dispersed networks living and operating in diverse physical and human terrains, from open multi-cultural societies to the harsh and hostile Hindu-Kush.⁵² This fact was verified by the Crowe Commission, which concluded from the study of the 1998 Kenya and Tanzania US Embassy bombings that terrorist attacks were unlikely to be preceded by tactical warning.⁵³ In the case of 9/11, Al-Qaeda exploited known gaps within the IC, such as the foreign and domestic divide of the CIA and FBI, by planning, organizing and training the attacks abroad, while assembling and executing it in the US homeland.⁵⁴

Lastly, from a social science perspective, the logical conclusion of the thesis that “intelligence failures are inevitable” is the futility of all intelligence reforms, because remedies are, at best, exercises in damage limitation.⁵⁵ Such defeatist fatalism is unhelpful from an operational perspective. While it is prudent to acknowledge that intelligence will fail, and to erect defensive measures to survive and recover quickly from surprise, a more constructive mantra for the IC to adopt is “intelligence failures are not inevitable,” and to continue the good work at providing warnings. Better still is the maxim “intelligence successes are inevitable.” This truism more accurately reflects reality by underscoring the IC’s many successes. The positive trajectory not only motivates the IC to persist in improving their “batting average,” it also has deterrent value against jihadist-terrorists who must operate knowing that the eagle-eyed watchmen never sleep.

CONCLUSION

When one’s favourite football team loses in a penalty shootout, the emotional blame on the goalkeeper is understandable. However, football is a team sport and equal accountability must be demanded from the defenders, midfielders and strikers for not defending, creating opportunities and scoring during regular time. The same may be said of 9/11.

While the IC failed to provide tactical warning, it cannot shoulder the responsibility for the surprise alone, because intelligence does not drive policy.⁵⁶ Policymakers were equally culpable, and credit also goes to the ingenuity of Al-Qaeda for its innovative terror methods and communication discipline.

This essay has argued that 9/11 qualifies, but does not confirm, the thesis “intelligence failures are inevitable,” in view of the IC’s successes at providing political and strategic warnings of the attacks. It proffers that a more valid thesis with which to study 9/11 is “surprise attacks are inevitable.” As history has shown, surprise rarely happens without warning. 9/11 demonstrated that while warnings provide the potential victim with information, it does not guarantee an appropriate reaction.⁵⁷

Finally, the official, public and academic post-mortem of 9/11 has not been kind to intelligence. This affirms President John F. Kennedy’s observation of the IC: “your successes are unheralded—your failures are trumpeted.”⁵⁸ To place the 9/11 intelligence failure in its proper perspective, “a world in which intelligence never ‘failed’ to foresee a terrorist attack would be a world in which there was no longer any terrorism.”⁵⁹ 🌐

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