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Trends. The Political Psychology of Indications and Warnings: The Meaning of "Information To Prevent Terrorist Attacks"

Editor

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Author: Editor

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Abstract: This article discusses alleged availability to the FBI of actionable intelligence prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Often ignored in the controversy over whether the United States' (US) Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) optimally or even passably collected, analyzed, produced, transmitted, and/or responded to intelligence bearing on the impending 9/11 terrorist attacks is the meaning of "information to prevent terrorist attacks." The highest level FBI authorities have been claiming such information was not available. [But see the Note below.] Some other FBI personnel and also other US Government leaders are suggesting that such information was or might have been available. Are these two sides contesting with similarly understood language, or are they arguing past each other?

The most conservative example of availability might constitute a pre-9/11 conversation intercepted via technology of the plot's participants describing all the operational details of the attacks. Or a written document obtained before 9/11 and provided by a highly credible source again laying out all aspects of the operational planning. Such examples are relatively infrequent in the history of aviation terrorism and--if more frequent--would obviate the need for an intelligence analysis capability.

Less conservative examples of availability might constitute the identification of motivations, trends, patterns, and operational likelihoods based on a variety of information--some of this information being extremely disparate, irrelevant, and orthogonal to the unsophisticated eye. Such attempts at this identification are the mode for the history of aviation terrorism and often, unfortunately, have not been completed before a terrorist operation occurs. This conclusion bears out the need for better intelligence analysis, better collection obviating the need for better analysis, or, perhaps, the approximately Sisyphean nature of analysis.

For the highest level FBI authorities to claim that "information to prevent terrorist attacks" was not available may be correct according to the above's first set of examples. According to the second set of examples, the claim may be correct, yet unknowable in accuracy, or incorrect--the latter even suggesting sheer incompetence on the part of these authorities. Yet, the most likely version of "incorrect" may involve the continuous noise of multiple threats; huge volumes of information that are themselves incomplete, ambiguous, or misleading; bureaucratic, cultural dysfunctions and political dynamics including the phenomenon of circling the wagons; and the bottom-line observation that the prediction of violence by a specific perpetrator for a specific time, place, target, and method is extremely difficult.

As with much in the way of Washington scandal and scandal in general, blame may be most due towards crisis management after the perceived shortfall about matters before the shortfall. Unfortunately, little of this might be germane for girding against the next terrorist onslaught.

Note. This article was written hours before the FBI Director publicly announced, "I cannot say for sure that there wasn't a possibility we could have come across some lead that would have led us to the

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hijackers." The double negative construction may suggest ambivalence even now in changing a public posture and private belief. (See Grossman, P.Z. (1994). The dilemma of prisoners: Choice during Stalin's great terror, 1936-38. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 38, 43-55; Johnston, D. (May 30, 2002). Self-criticism and risk: many interests to please. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Lewis, N.A., & Johnston, D. (May 29, 2002). F.B.I. Director, facing criticism, plans new focus on terror flight. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Simmons, C. H., & Mitch, J. R. (1985). Labeling public aggression: When is it terrorism? *Journal of Social Psychology*, 125, 245-251; Sternberg, R.J. (2002). *Why smart people can be so stupid*. Yale University Press.) (Keywords: FBI, Intelligence Gathering, Terrorism.)