

Reticence on a Failure Of Intelligence May End

[Ed note: but not for a while...]

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Three months after the deadly surprises of Sept. 11, in a society where finger-pointing is a way of life, the nation's intelligence agencies have largely escaped condemnation for not having seen what was coming.

That may change when Congress holds hearings on the subject, probably next year, but so far surprisingly few people inside government or out have been willing to accuse the agencies of falling down on the job. And there has been no chorus of voices calling for the head of George J. Tenet, the director of central intelligence.

Why?

It is not as if there were no precedents for the attacks in New York and outside Washington. The World Trade Center itself was attacked by Islamic extremists in 1993, the United States embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were bombed in 1998, and a hole was blown in the side of the destroyer Cole in Yemen only last year.

Secretary of State Colin L. Powell said not long ago that Washington had picked up "lots of signs" that terrorists were planning a major attack in the United States. Several are reported to have originated with European allies. But General Powell added, "We never got the fidelity or information we would have liked." Meaning, presumably, that the data were too vague.

Such was the case, most historians agree, 60 years ago. In the fall of 1941, radio intercepts and other intelligence indicated that war with Japan was imminent, but it was not clear where. Many thought that the Philippines were the likely first target. As a result, no specific warning was sent to the ill-fated senior commander at Pearl Harbor, Adm. Husband E. Kimmel.

Defenders of today's intelligence and security agencies -- chiefly the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation -- argue that it is never possible to know for certain which of thousands of threats they uncover should be taken most seriously. President Bush, whose father once led the C.I.A., shares that view, and recently said the United States has "the best intelligence we can possibly have."

Representative Porter J. Goss, a Florida Republican who leads the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, goes so far as to deny that any intelligence failure took place.

Mr. Goss, a former C.I.A. officer, is seen by many people in Washington as a habitual defender of Mr. Tenet, but he rejects the idea that he is a "slavish adherent" and promises thorough hearings.

Others are far more critical. Senator Richard C. Shelby, Republican of Alabama, the ranking minority member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, has said that the intelligence agencies were "caught flat-footed" and insisted that "there had to be some evidence, somewhere, of something being planned." He has also spoken of "a stunning intelligence failure."

Two explanations have been put forward for the intelligence problems. One is a lack of language skills -- an echo of the war in Southeast Asia, when few in government spoke Vietnamese or Cambodian. The F.B.I., charged with the main counterterrorism responsibility, had to make a public appeal after Sept. 11 for people fluent in Arabic, Pashtun and other languages.

Second, the agencies have been accused of relying too heavily on "sigint" -- intelligence gathered electronically -- and not enough on "humint" -- intelligence gathered on the ground. Rob Simmons, a freshman Republican representative from Connecticut, who served in the C.I.A. himself, is one of those contending that the ranks of spies have been unduly thinned.

Hundreds were fired in 1979, in a Carter administration shake-up, and in the Clinton administration, barriers to the recruitment of criminals and others of dubious background were set up. Senator Bob Graham, Democrat of Florida and the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said they must come down. In critical areas, he said, "We aren't going to find the kind of guys we need in monasteries."

Mr. Graham has promised "a thorough and thoughtful investigation." But it is still too soon, he said recently, because extensive hearings now would divert the agencies from doing their job. Once the possibility of fresh attacks by "sleepers" already in the United States has diminished, the time will be ripe, he has told his colleagues. *[Emphasis added]*

Regardless of the timing, politics may inhibit the search for truth. Neither Republicans nor Democrats want to risk being accused, in the present climate, of doing or saying anything unpatriotic.

Playing the blame game, said a senior Republican senator, "could easily blow up in our faces."

Furthermore, the record of the Clinton administration is at least as vulnerable as that of the Bush administration, so most Democrats will be loath to lead any partisan charge.