



Did We Know What Was Coming?

The September 11 terrorist attacks required extensive planning. Our intelligence services knew enough to have responded better.

John Philip Walker Lindh, better known as the “American Taliban,” is accused of conspiring with Osama bin Laden’s terrorist network to kill American citizens. According to the federal criminal complaint, Lindh’s role in the terrorist conspiracy “began in May or June of 2001.” It was then that Lindh “agreed to attend an al-Qaeda training camp for additional and extensive military training, knowing that America and its citizens were the enemies of bin Laden and al-Qaeda and that a principal purpose of al-Qaeda was to fight and kill Americans.” While at the training camp, Lindh allegedly learned that “bin Laden had sent forth some fifty people to carry out twenty suicide terrorist operations against the United States and Israel.”

Significantly, the indictment does not accuse Lindh of actively participating in the terrorist plot. During a visit with senior al-Qaeda official Abu Mohammad Al-Masri, the self-exiled American was invited to take part in “operations against the United States and Israel.” Lindh allegedly declined to carry out terrorist missions, choosing instead to fight on the front lines of the Taliban’s civil war with its Northern Alliance rivals.

The case against Lindh rests heavily on proving that he had foreknowledge of al-Qaeda’s plot to commit mass murder. To make that case it is not necessary to prove that Lindh actually killed Americans, or that he had specific knowledge regarding the target of the attack, or the means by which it would be carried out. The burden on the prosecution is to validate its conspiracy theory against Lindh by proving that the defendant knew the attack was coming, and freely chose to associate with the terrorist cabal who plotted the atrocity.

Federal authorities will be much more eager to prosecute Lindh than to question how he was able to penetrate to the very core of Osama bin Laden’s terrorist network. This eccentric, alienated California teenager fascinated with radical Islam managed to do what highly skilled intelligence professionals supposedly could not: Insinuate himself so deeply into al-Qaeda — even meeting “The Evil One” himself on one occasion — that he obtained critical intelligence about the forthcoming attack on America.

Lindh stands accused of hideous crimes. But from the federal government’s perspective, Lindh is dangerous for another reason: His success as an infiltrator underscores the consummate failure of our hugely expensive “intelligence community” to protect our nation from foreign attack.

But the trial could pose an even graver threat to the intelligence community if it prompts the public to think seriously about the charges against the “American Taliban.” What if it can be demonstrated that federal authorities responsible for defending our nation knew as much about the impending terrorist attack as Lindh did? What would be the political, moral, and legal liabilities of officials who were in possession of such knowledge, and failed to act upon it?

FBI Whistleblowers

As we will show, the feds knew no later than June that an attack from bin Laden was coming. By August it had identified several key co-conspirators, and had one in custody. And two days after the attack Chicago attorney David Schippers — a lifelong Democrat who was chief investigative counsel in the Clinton impeachment — disclosed that he had attempted to warn Attorney General John Ashcroft about the coming attack.



Written by [William Norman Grigg](#) on March 11, 2002

As previously reported in *The New American* ("OKC Bombing: Precursor to 9-11?" in our January 28, 2002 issue), Schippers told a Pittsburgh radio audience on September 13 that he had learned from FBI agents in Minnesota and Chicago that a massive terrorist attack had been planned for lower Manhattan. He had developed this information six weeks before the Black Tuesday atrocity. However, Justice Department officials repeatedly spurned Schippers' attempts to provide the information to Ashcroft; one of them reportedly sneered, "We don't start our investigations at the top." This is a curious objection, given Schippers' credentials and professional standing — and given that Ashcroft himself had warned in June that "Americans are a high-priority target for terrorists."

Three veteran federal law enforcement agents confirmed to *The New American* that the information provided to Schippers was widely known within the Bureau before September 11. Because these individuals face possible personal or professional retaliation, they agreed to speak with us on condition of anonymity. Two of them, however, have expressed a willingness to testify before Congress regarding the views they have shared with us.

"I don't buy the idea that we didn't know what was coming," a former FBI official with extensive counter-terrorism experience commented to *The New American*. "Within 24 hours [of the attack] the Bureau had about 20 people identified, and photos were sent out to the news media. Obviously this information was available in the files and somebody was sitting on it." This former FBI agent noted that before Zacarias Moussaoui, the so-called "Twentieth Hijacker," was detained in Minneapolis, he had undergone flight instruction in Oklahoma, "where we know that Arab terrorist networks have been established for many years."

An active federal counter-terrorism investigator told *The New American* that it was well known "all over the Bureau, how these [warnings] were ignored by Washington.... All indications are that this information came from some of [the Bureau's] most experienced guys, people who have devoted their lives to this kind of work. But their warnings were placed in a pile in someone's office in Washington.... In some cases, these field agents predicted, almost precisely, what happened on September 11. So we were all holding our breath ... hoping that the situation would be remedied."

According to the former FBI agent quoted above, the Bureau could have prevented the Black Tuesday massacre if it had adequately investigated the Middle East connection to the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. This assessment is supported by another former FBI agent who spoke with this magazine.

"We knew that there were Arab terrorist groups working in Oklahoma during the mid-1990s, but nothing was done about it," he recalls. "We were constantly getting information about terrorist groups working in the area, and it would be put in what was called a 'zero file.' Once you sent it in, you were never told to act on it. And you were never told to follow up on it." Nor were the agents allowed to share that intelligence with state and local police: "We had a dissemination form that we could use in sharing intelligence with local law enforcement. We'd have to get clearance to give the information out. And this led to a favorite saying of administrative people in the Bureau: 'This is on a need to know basis, and the locals don't need to know.'"

"This is pretty appalling," comments the first former agent. "The FBI has had access to this information since at least 1997. We're obviously not doing our job. I never expected to see something like this happen in our country, but in a way I wasn't shocked when it did. There's got to be more to this than we can see — high-level people whose careers are at stake, and don't want the truth coming out.... What agenda is someone following? Obviously, people had to know — there had to be people who knew this information was being circulated. People like [the Black Tuesday terrorists] don't just move in and out



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of the country undetected. If somebody in D.C. is taking this information and burying it — and it's very easy to control things from D.C. — then this problem goes much, much deeper.... It's terrible to think this, but this must have been allowed to happen as part of some other agenda."

Negligence — or Worse?

When one talks of hidden agendas behind the official story of the Black Tuesday attack, he can expect to be denounced as a "conspiracy theorist." In fact, President Bush himself condemned such supposedly irresponsible talk during his November 10 address to the UN General Assembly. "We must speak the truth about terror," insisted the president. "Let us never tolerate outrageous conspiracy theories concerning the attacks of September the 11th — malicious lies that attempt to shift the blame away from the terrorists themselves, away from the guilty."

The president's denunciation of "conspiracy theorists" was echoed in a January 14 "news analysis" by James Rosen, a Washington correspondent for the McClatchy News Service. "Even in the wake of unspeakable evil, some people can't leave bad enough alone," groused Rosen. "While the vast majority of Americans accept their government's claim that Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda network launched the attacks, a number of boisterous malcontents are peddling alternative explanations."

It hardly detracts from the guilt of bin Laden and his henchmen to point out that there are plausible "alternative explanations" to the government's account of Black Tuesday — namely, that our conscientious federal law enforcement and security agencies were caught completely off-guard by an attack they could not prevent. There is evidence that the feds knew of bin Laden's impending terrorist strike no later than June. And we know for certain that by August, federal authorities had identified several key co-conspirators, and had one in custody.

On June 23, air industry officials received a remarkably detailed warning about a threat from Osama bin Laden's terrorist network to use airliners to attack Americans. Citing a report from the Arabic-language MBC satellite television channel, the AirlineBiz.com news service reported: "In recent years, U.S. citizens have found themselves the target of several attacks by the terror network of Osama bin Laden. One such attack involved a plot to destroy 12 U.S. airliners in Asia. A jury found Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, the alleged mastermind of the scheme, and two other defendants, guilty on all counts. Yousef is also the alleged mastermind of the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center."

The scheme to use jetliners as terrorist weapons, called "Project Bojinka," had been uncovered by police in the Philippines in 1995, and the details had been provided to American law enforcement officials. (See "Could We Have Prevented the Attacks?" in our November 5, 2001 issue.) The significance of bin Laden's threats was not lost upon Bob Monetti, president of the Victims of Pan Am Flight 103, which was destroyed by a terrorist bomb in 1988. "I hope the airlines are watching this situation closely," declared Monetti. "The airlines are at risk. They need to take all appropriate measures and counter-measures to ensure the safety of their passengers."

According to the June 23 AirlineBiz.com report, the Arabic satellite television network MBC claimed that "the next two weeks will witness a big surprise." An MBC reporter who had met with bin Laden in Afghanistan on June 21 predicted that "a severe blow is expected against U.S. and Israeli interests worldwide. There is a major state of mobilization among the Osama bin Laden forces. It seems that there is a race of who will strike first. Will it be the United States or Osama bin Laden?" Despite such detailed advance warnings, bin Laden won that "race."

Ignoring the "20th Hijacker"



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By September 11, federal authorities not only had 10 weeks' advance notice of an impending attack from bin Laden, they also had one of the alleged plotters in custody. This was acknowledged by CIA Director George Tenet as the 9-11 attack was underway. Amid reports of the suicide hijackings, Tenet was overheard saying: "I wonder if it has anything to do with this guy taking pilot training." Tenet "was referring to Zacarias Moussaoui, who had been detained in August after attracting suspicion when he sought training at a Minnesota flight school," observed the January 27 *Washington Post*. After the suspect was taken into custody, "the FBI had asked the CIA and the National Security Agency to run phone traces on Moussaoui, already the subject of a five-inch-thick file in the bureau."

According to the December 29 Minneapolis *Star-Tribune*, "Moussaoui raised suspicions at the Pan Am International Flight Academy in Egan [Minnesota]" when he showed up in August for instruction in piloting jumbo jets. He "first raised eyebrows when, during a simple introductory exchange, he said he was from France, but then didn't seem to understand when the instructor spoke French to him," recalled the paper. "Moussaoui then became belligerent and evasive about his background.... In addition, he seemed inept in basic flying procedures, while seeking expensive training on an advanced commercial jet simulator."

Flight school employees "began whispering that he could be a hijacker," reported the February 8 *New York Times*. John Rosengren, director of operations at the school, recalled that Moussaoui's instructor was "concerned and wondered why someone who was not a pilot and had so little experience was trying to pack so much training into such a short time." "The more he was able to talk to him, the more he decided he was not pilot material," observes Rosengren. In addition, "There was discussion about how much fuel was on board a 747-400 and how much damage that could cause if it hit anything."

By this time, Moussaoui's instructor had already scurried to a telephone to call the FBI's Minneapolis office. "Do you realize how serious this is?" he asked an FBI agent during the August 15 phone conversation. "This man wants training on a 747. A 747 fully loaded with fuel could be used as a weapon!" The FBI arrested Moussaoui the next day. However, notes the *Star-Tribune*, "the Minneapolis agents were unable to persuade FBI lawyers in Washington, D.C., to seek a warrant to search his possessions under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, which requires evidence that the suspect is an agent of a foreign power or a terrorist group." The frustrated field agents were trying to gather sufficient evidence to get a warrant when Moussaoui's alleged co-conspirators piloted jetliners into the Trade Center towers and the Pentagon.

Charged with conspiracy to commit mass murder, Moussaoui is not the only member of the Black Tuesday plot whom federal authorities knew about. On the morning of September 11, noted the December 30 *New York Times*, "two people already identified by the government as suspected terrorists boarded separate American Airlines flights from Boston using their own names." Federal officials were also aware of a third hijacker, Hani Hanjour, who had come to the attention of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) while studying at the Pan Am International Flight Academy in Phoenix.

Officials at the school had raised questions about Hanjour's inability to speak English, the international language of aviation. When they expressed concerns to the FAA, the agency stepped in to provide assistance — to Hanjour. According to the *Star-Tribune*, "An FAA representative sat in on a class to observe Hanjour ... and discussed with school officials finding an Arabic-speaking person to help him with his English." Hanjour returned the favor by plowing American Airlines Flight 77 into the Pentagon.

A Limited Inquiry?



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As Congress probes the security issues raised by the Black Tuesday attack, the investigation must be framed by a question similar to that dealt with in the “American Taliban” trial: What did our federal security and intelligence agencies know of the impending attack, and when did they know it? Recall that Lindh supposedly learned of the terrorist plot in May or June of last year. Evidence available in the public record makes it clear that the Justice Department and other branches of the federal government were aware of at least as much as Lindh is accused of knowing.

Unfortunately, Congress seems content thus far to defer to the White House’s desire to limit the scope and intensity of any inquiries into the tragedy. In meetings and phone conversations with congressional leaders, President Bush and Vice President Cheney “expressed the concern that a review of what happened on September 11 would take resources and personnel away from the effort in the war on terrorism,” Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) told CNN. Daschle promised that he would “limit the scope and overall review of what happened.”

Congressman Porter Goss (R-Fla.) and Senator Bob Graham (D-Fla.), who head the intelligence committees in their respective houses of Congress, extended similar assurances as the joint congressional investigation began in February. “This is not a who-shall-we-hang type of investigation,” stated Rep. Goss. “It is [a] ‘where are the gaps in America’s defense and what do we do about it’ type of investigation” — a “forward-looking” inquiry intended to bring about needed reforms. But without accountability, “gaps” will handicap even the most comprehensive security system. As *Washington Post* columnist Howard Kurtz observed, “How can we prevent future attacks if we don’t understand how we missed the last one?”

Those responsible for the lethal “intelligence failure” of September 11 must be made to answer for their inaction. The congressional investigative panel has subpoena power. It should use it to summon responsible figures from the FBI, CIA, National Security Agency, and other federal law enforcement and intelligence agencies. These officials should be subject to congressional scrutiny at least as severe as that being devoted to the actions of Enron officials — whose alleged crimes, serious as they may be, did not contribute to the death of thousands of American citizens.

In testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee, CIA director Tenet “objected to the very word ‘failure’ in connection with the intelligence gathering ahead of the devastating surprise attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon,” reported the *New York Times*. “The director said the CIA knew ‘in broad terms’ last summer that terrorists might be planning major operations in the United States. But, he said, ‘we never had the texture’ — meaning enough specific information — to stop what happened.”

Much the same can be said of John Walker Lindh: He knew “in broad terms” that the attacks were coming, even though the specific “texture” was not explained to him. For refusing to act to prevent the massacre, Lindh has been charged with conspiracy to murder Americans. In contrast, the FBI and CIA, which had the same intelligence as Lindh, have been rewarded with generous budget increases.

Though administrators of federal law enforcement and intelligence agencies would prefer to cloak the issue in self-serving euphemisms, Black Tuesday was — at best — a singular intelligence failure, for which those officials must be held responsible. And if, as one of the above-quoted former FBI counter-terrorism agents suggests, efforts to prevent that attack were compromised because of covert “agendas” in Washington, Congress must be prepared to take even more serious action.

In any case, the American public must demand that Congress ask unpleasant questions about federal



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foreknowledge of the 9-11 atrocity — and that the inquiry unflinchingly follow the facts wherever they lead.



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