

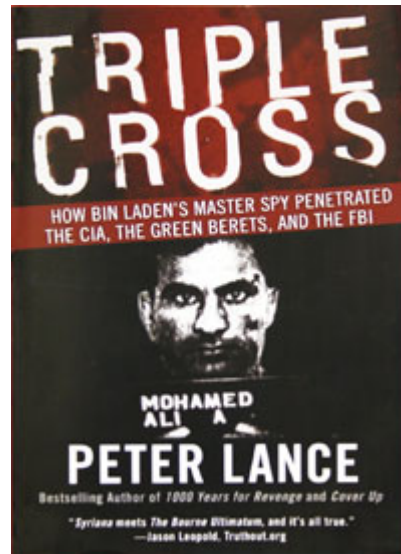


Written by on August 7, 2009

Book Review: Triple Cross

What do a New York mob hit man, a mysterious aviation catastrophe, and a young Japanese engineer named Haruki Ikegami have in common? If you don't know (and this reviewer didn't, before preparing to write this article), then you may have missed the greatest scandal of our time.

That, admittedly, is a tall claim in the age of Monica Lewinsky and Bernie Madoff. But the formidable evidence assembled in Emmy Award-winning journalist Peter Lance's extensively updated book [Triple Cross](#), which examines the history of al-Qaeda's attempts to carry out terrorist acts on American soil, exposes a dark, thoroughly corrupt side of American government officialdom that few ordinary Americans can imagine.



Item: On December 11, 1994, a small bomb hidden beneath seat 26K of a Philippine Airlines 747 bound for Narita Airport from Cebu City detonates, killing luckless passenger Haruki Ikegami and forcing the plane to make an emergency landing at Okinawa.

Item: In the spring of 1996, jailed mobster Gregory Scarpa, Jr., son of one of the mafia's most infamous hit men, befriends a pair of accused terrorists being held in adjacent cells, Ramzi Yousef and Abdul Hakim Murad. Yousef, the accused mastermind behind the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, contemplates how blowing up a civilian airliner might weaken the prosecution's case against him, by suggesting that other bombing masterminds still at large might be responsible for the Trade Center attack and other outrages. Scarpa passes this information, along with a large amount of additional intelligence, to federal investigators.

Item: On the evening of July 17, 1996, TWA Flight 800, a 747 with 230 passengers bound for Paris from John F. Kennedy Airport, explodes off Long Island. What was almost universally assumed to be a terrorist attack at the time was later pronounced an accident arising from an explosion in the plane's center fuel tank ignited by an electrical spark. The possibility that the detonation might have been caused by an ingenious, small-scale device similar to the bomb that killed Haruki Ikegami was never considered.

These and many other events — some a matter of public record and some, until now, unknown to the public — are in *Triple Cross* woven together in a decades-long tale of intrigue, corruption, and mass murder culminating in the tragedy of 9/11, a story in which, as one reviewer put it, "*Syriana* meets *The Bourne Ultimatum*, and it's all true."

The thread running through the narrative of [Triple Cross](#) is not Ramzi Yousef — an evil genius with a



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Lex Luthor-esque aptitude for mass mayhem if there ever was one — but an even more sinister figure, and withal one much less known to the general public, al-Qaeda agent and terrorist mastermind Ali Mohammed, a former major in the Egyptian army implicated in the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat. *Triple Cross* is the story of how one of the paramount figures in international Islamic terrorism managed not only to live undetected for years in the United States, all the while aiding and abetting terrorism abroad, but also to infiltrate the CIA and Green Berets. In a triple cross of colossal audacity, Mohammed posed as an FBI informant while acting as Osama bin Laden's security chief and top al-Qaeda spy. In this capacity, he helped to enable some of al-Qaeda's most notorious terrorist attacks, including the twin bombings of U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, in August 1998, and the bombing of the *U.S.S. Cole* at Aden, Yemen, in October 2000.

One theme that emerges unmistakably from [Triple Cross](#) is that, whereas the general public tends to view terrorist acts as isolated events, terrorism is in fact well organized and coordinated, with periodic "summits" where long-term strategy is coordinated and intelligence shared. The events of 9/11 had roots in episodes years and even decades previous, such as the aforementioned assassination of Anwar Sadat by a cadre of Egyptian military conspirators angry at the Camp David accord with Israel.

Nor does the history of al-Qaeda-linked terrorism on U.S. soil commence with the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993, as might be supposed, but with the 1990 murder of New York rabbi and conservative firebrand Meier Kahane. That assassination was carried out by El Sayyid Nosair, one of the many al-Qaeda assassins trained by Ali Mohammed.

Mohammed himself — handsome, charming, and utterly dedicated to a well-concealed extremist agenda — had by that time been living in the United States for years, was married to an American woman, and had served in the U.S. military at Fort Bragg. He was also, in 1988, fingered by the government of Egypt as an Islamic radical, but the U.S. military chose to ignore Egyptian warnings. By the early 1990s, Mohammed was training the members of the terrorist cell that carried out the first World Trade Center bombing, holding court at the Al-Salaam mosque in Jersey City, where the now-notorious blind sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman was stirring up anti-American sentiment.

In 1992, Mohammed became an informant for the FBI, but managed to continue gathering intelligence for al-Qaeda while keeping U.S. authorities from vital intelligence that might have stymied al-Qaeda attacks against the United States in East Africa, Yemen, and ultimately (on 9/11), New York and Washington. (See "[Unleashing a Terrorist](#)," November 26, 2007).

But Mohammed wasn't the only reason for U.S. ineptitude at preventing major terror attacks. As Lance documents in disturbing and sometimes mind-numbing detail, individuals in the U.S. government — in the FBI, military, and elsewhere — appear to have had agendas of their own that often conflicted with the best interests of the American public. Turf battles, political infighting, a lack of interagency communication and coordination — all of these undoubtedly contributed to the institutional paralysis that prevented the 9/11 hijackers from being intercepted. Despite a clear intelligence path leading back to the early '90s, when Ramzi Yousef first formulated a plan to use civilian airliners as terrorist weapons, a steady stream of intelligence that such a plan was in the works, and the FBI's awareness of young Middle Eastern men learning to fly passenger jets at U.S. training facilities, the men who became the 19 hijackers of 9/11 were allowed to operate without interference.

Mere official ineptitude does not tell the whole story, however, as Lance demonstrates. Over and over we see Ali Mohamed being promoted and protected by invisible hands high within our government, beginning with his special CIA visa that allowed him into the United States even though he was on State



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Department terrorist Watch List. When Ali Mohamed was caught by Canadian police trying to bring a top al-Qaeda terrorist into the United States, his FBI handler got him released with a phone call. For this reviewer, the most disturbing of many subplots in *Triple Cross* is the story of TWA Flight 800 and the probable muzzling of the investigation into a terrorist connection to avoid giving embarrassing credence to a jailed Mafioso, Greg Scarpa, Jr. Scarpa had given potentially damaging information regarding a certain FBI special agent, Lin DeVecchio, whose apparently corrupt relationship with Scarpa's father (Greg Scarpa, Sr.) threatened to taint a huge body of evidence the feds hoped to use in their war against the Colombo crime family. The feds, from then-FBI Director Louis Freeh downward, appear, from the evidence in *Triple Cross*, to have made a calculated decision to whitewash the DeVecchio affair in order to preserve the Colombo investigation, which meant discrediting all evidence — including terrorism-related intelligence — provided by Scarpa, Jr. Accordingly, the information gathered by Scarpa from Yousef was set aside as fraudulent, DeVecchio was ushered into a fully pensioned retirement, and Scarpa, Jr. was slapped with 40 years' worth of RICO-related charges and bundled off to the Supermax in Colorado, safely beyond the reach of nosy investigative journalists. And the full story of Flight 800, including the likelihood that it was brought down by a Yousef-contrived mini-explosive concealed under a seat directly over the center fuel tank, may never be known in full.

The Scarpa-Yousef-DeVecchio-Flight 800 narrative is just one of many tales of possible Machiavellian malfeasance in high places with which *Triple Cross* rewards the patient reader. Bewildering in its oft-Byzantine attention to detail and dot-connecting, dismaying in its portrayal of the incompetence, treachery, and self-serving cynicism of the web of government officials who permitted 9/11 and other heinous crimes to take place, and infuriating in its account of crimes unsolved and guilt unpunished, *Triple Cross* is essential reading for those who want to understand modern political history, the war on terrorism, and indeed, the world itself, as they truly are — with all their unlovely, amoral gamesmanship, disregard for the welfare of innocents, and lawless intrigue in high places — rather than what we may wish them to be. *Triple Cross* will brighten few days, but open many eyes.

[*Triple Cross: How Bin Laden's Master Spy Penetrated the CIA, the Green Berets, and the FBI*](#), by Peter Lance, New York: HarperCollins, 2006 (2009 ed.), 642 pages, paperback, \$16.99.



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