



## Agents Challenge 9/11 Commission

Shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on America, the FBI went on a hiring binge for language translators. Special Agent John M. Cole, who was working in the FBI's Washington, D.C., headquarters, was assigned to do risk assessments on applicants for the translator positions.

Something in the first applicant file he picked up set off alarm bells. "One of the first things I noticed is that her father was a retired military general from a foreign power," Special Agent Cole told *The New American*. "He also lived six months of the year in the U.S. and the other six months in this foreign country. I ran his name through the FBI computer and found that he had been stationed as a military attaché in the U.S. during the 1970s. One of the things I knew from my years in counterintelligence was that every military attaché from that country had proven to be an intelligence agent for that government. This was a red flag."

Special Agent Cole says he did exactly what he was supposed to do: He took the applicant file to his supervisor, recommended against hiring the applicant and suggested a further risk assessment by the counterterrorism unit. The supervisor was glad that Cole had caught the potential security problem and agreed with his evaluation. Shortly thereafter, says Cole, he asked the supervisor if the risk assessment had been done on the applicant. He was dumbfounded at the response he received. He recounts: "I was told, 'Not that it matters now, she's already been hired and has just started to work in the Washington, D.C., field office.'" What's more, she had been given Top Secret clearance.

"I was shocked," he says. "I couldn't believe that this obvious security risk was being rushed through without proper risk assessments and put in such a sensitive position." John Cole is no rookie; he is an 18-year FBI veteran with much of that time spent in counterintelligence, as well as undercover operations and counterterrorism.

But he was in for more shocks, because it got much worse. According to Cole, there were as many as 12 additional applicants hired as language specialists, whose files he had personally inspected, that showed red flags for various reasons. These also were not properly vetted, he says. "Now remember, this was during the time period right after the Robert Hannsen case broke," he points out, "and the Bureau is insisting that it's doing everything possible to tighten security in the wake of this scandal. We saw the incredible damage that one Hannsen could cause, and yet, here we were setting ourselves up for several Hannsen-type disasters in the future." Robert Hannsen, an FBI special agent with a long career in counterintelligence, was arrested in February 2001 for spying for Russia and the former Soviet Union. The total damage he caused to U.S. security may never be known, but his case is regarded as the worst known case of foreign penetration of the FBI.

Cole says he became more and more alarmed at what he saw and repeatedly filed reports through channels warning that the Bureau was facing very serious potential security breaches. Instead of tightening security on questionable applicants, he says, "the Security Programs people started coming down on me" for continuing to bring these matters up.

He had been covering Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India for the Bureau, which had become an especially important region in the terror war. Suddenly, he was transferred to the Sub-Saharan Africa desk, which was tantamount to being exiled to Siberia. Yet, even here, he discovered he could put his experience to good use. Perusing a file of a former FBI language specialist for this region, he discovered that the individual had been providing FBI information to a foreign intelligence service. This was both a crime and an enormous security breach. "I asked why a full investigation had not been initiated against this



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individual and why he had not been arrested, since he was still in the U.S.," Cole recounts. "Again, instead of doing the obvious right thing of opening this case, they took the Sub-Saharan desk away from me."

It was obvious, says Cole, that he was suffering retaliation for "rocking the boat," which, in this case, meant simply doing his job. "For 18 years, I had gotten nothing but exceptional ratings," he notes, but now, all of a sudden, he was getting negative write-ups. This is precisely what FBI Director Robert Mueller pledged would not happen in the new, post-9/11 FBI.

"I will not tolerate reprisals or intimidation by any bureau employee against those who make protected disclosures, nor will I tolerate attempts to prevent the employees from making such disclosures," Mueller told the Senate Judiciary Committee on June 6, 2002. "I want people in the field to tell me what is happening," he continued. "And I encourage, welcome the criticism, the insight, the suggestions, whether it be from the organization or from without the organization."

However, the Bureau's practices seem to contradict Director Mueller's rhetoric. The cases of Special Agents John Roberts, Jane Turner, Robert Wright, and Barry Carmody provide recent examples of FBI retaliation against whistleblowers. So do the cases of FBI language specialists Sibel Edmonds and Behrooz Sarshar. Edmonds, a Turkic and Arabic translator, insists that federal officials had specific information about the impending 9/11 attacks. In an August 2, 2004 open letter to the 9/11 Commission, Edmonds charged:

More than four months prior to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, in April 2001, a long-term FBI informant/asset who had been providing the bureau with information since 1990, provided two FBI agents and a translator with specific information regarding a terrorist attack.... Through his contacts in Afghanistan, he received information that: 1) Osama bin Laden was planning a major terrorist attack in the United States targeting four or five major cities; 2) the attack was going to involve airplanes; 3) some of the individuals in charge of carrying out this attack were already in place in the United States; 4) the attack was going to be carried out soon, in a few months.

Although Edmonds' charges have been public for more than two years, the Justice Department and FBI have asserted the rarely invoked State Secret Privilege to block the release of the Inspector General's investigation into her allegations.

"Director Mueller tells Congress that he is waiting for the Inspector General's report on the [John] Roberts case," John Cole notes. "Well, the IG report confirms that the FBI has been retaliating against Roberts for exposing serious FBI misconduct. Mueller knows that but has done nothing. And he has been blocking all documents related to Sibel Edmonds' case."

Then there is Mueller's testimony before the 9/11 Commission. "It was amazing," says Cole. "Mueller made it appear that everything is rosy at the Bureau and that all its problems have been fixed or are being fixed. He stated that the FBI's top priorities are: 1) counterterrorism; 2) counterintelligence; and 3) training. However, what I was witnessing personally at headquarters completely contradicted that. Counterintelligence and counterterrorism had become a total sham. The claim that training is now a top priority is also false. Training has actually decreased 75 percent since 9/11. Much of the training that is being done is worthless stuff put together by retired Bureau officials who have gotten fat contracts without competitive bidding."

What about Mueller's claim that he wanted to hear from agents? Empty public relations, says Cole. After repeatedly failing to get a response to his security concerns on the language translators, Cole



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went directly to Mueller. He says he hand-carried four letters to Mueller's office — two in 2002 and two in 2003 — and delivered them to Mueller's secretary. "I never got a response from him," he told *The New American*. "Zero. Nothing."

Well, not exactly nothing. John Cole did finally get a response from his superiors, but that response was not the one he had hoped for. In January 2004, he was notified that he was being suspended. In March he resigned from the FBI. Like all FBI special agents, John Cole solemnly swore "to support, uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic." It's an oath he takes seriously. "When you take an oath to defend this country and do the right thing, you had better mean it," he told *The New American*. "And people should be held accountable when — whether through negligence or malfeasance — they violate that oath. Otherwise, what's the point of having it."

The FBI has changed since he first became a special agent, says Cole, who now works as a security analyst for the U.S. Air Force. "It used to be a great place to work," he says. "You really felt that you were part of a team that was doing important, rewarding work. Now it has become so corrupt and there is no accountability; the most conscientious, professional employees are often penalized, while some of the worst are promoted. The Bureau is in worse shape than ever and morale is very low. This is very dangerous for America's security."

This conviction that our country was being left wide open to terrorist attack led John Cole to join Sibel Edmonds, former U.S. Customs Agent Diane Kleiman, FAA/TSA Special Agent Bogdan Dzakovic and other federal law enforcement and intelligence agents at the September 13, 2004 Whistleblowers press conference in Washington, D.C. These officers on the front lines of the terror war warn that, far from fixing the failures that led to 9/11, many of the 9/11 Report recommendations would do more harm than good. "Director Mueller and the commission both talk a lot about accountability," says Cole, "but both have refused to hold anyone accountable. They simply want to reshuffle the bureaucracy, spend more money, hire more people, increase their authority — and leave the same people in charge. That's a prescription for more — and even bigger — disasters."

### **Sidebar: FBI Heroes in the Terror War**

Veteran FBI Special Agent Robert Wright and his partner John Vincent tried for years before 9/11 to get authorization for a criminal investigation of an al-Qaeda terror cell in Chicago and suspected al-Qaeda financier Yassin Al-Kadi. Their efforts were repeatedly blocked by FBI officials. In a memo written three months before 9/11, Special Agent Wright warned that Americans would die as a result of the FBI's failure to investigate terrorists living in this country. Too late for the victims of 9/11, the U.S. Government has indicted Yassin Al-Kadi. Agent Wright has been demoted, subjected to harassment and repeated investigations by his superiors, and assigned to menial work.

FBI Special Agent Coleen Rowley and members of her Minneapolis FBI office were blocked repeatedly by FBI headquarters in their efforts to investigate Zacarias Moussaoui, the "20th hijacker." Thankfully, the Minneapolis office, which had arrested Moussaoui several weeks before 9/11, did not release him.



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