



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on November 8, 2010

## Federal Informant Helped Plot Mumbai Attacks

In 2008 a series of terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India, claimed the lives of 164 people. According to the New York Times, one of the key plotters of the attacks was David C. Headley, a former drug dealer then serving as an informant in Pakistan for the U.S. government. To make matters worse, Washington had evidence that Headley was a terrorist sympathizer yet kept him on its payroll, says the Times, “even as he was learning to deal with explosives and small arms in terrorist training camps.”



That a government informant would participate in crimes should come as no surprise. Informants are, after all, generally recruited from within the ranks of lawbreakers, with reduced prison sentences and even cash payments as the enticements to serve as state snitches. Headley, the son of a Pakistani diplomat and a Philadelphia socialite, was no exception. The *Times* reports that Headley had been arrested in 1987 and 1998 on drug charges. After each arrest, says the paper, “he cooperated with the [Drug Enforcement Administration] in exchange for lighter sentences. He specialized in the ties between Pakistani drug organizations and American dealers along the East Coast.” His arrest in 1998, during the time he was serving as an informant, did nothing to dampen the DEA’s enthusiasm for employing his services thereafter, according to the report:

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A September 1998 letter that prosecutors submitted to court after an arrest then showed that the government considered Mr. Headley — who had admitted to distributing 15 kilograms of heroin over his years as a dealer — so “reliable and forthcoming,” that they sent him to Pakistan to “develop intelligence on Pakistani heroin traffickers.”

The letter indicates that Mr. Headley, who faced seven to nine years in prison for his offense, was such a trusted partner to the drug agency in the 1990s that he helped translate hours of tape-recorded telephone intercepts, and coached drug agency investigators on how to question Pakistani suspects.



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The courts looked favorably on his cooperation, according to records, sentencing Mr. Headley to 15 months in prison, and five years' probation.

In October 2001, while Headley was on probation, a former girlfriend told the FBI that she believed that Headley "was sympathetic to extremist groups in Pakistan," reports the *Times*. When questioned about the woman's accusation, Headley, naturally, "told them she was unreliable," according to the newspaper. "[Officials] said that while he seemed to have a philosophical affinity for some [terrorist] groups, there was no evidence that he was plotting against the United States. Also influencing the handling of the case, they said, was that he had been a longtime informant."

That seems to have put to rest the FBI's concerns about Headley's possible terrorist sympathies. Writes the *Times*: "Less than a month later, those concerns did not come up when a federal court in New York granted Mr. Headley an early release from probation so that he could be sent to work for the [DEA] in Pakistan. It is unclear what Mr. Headley was supposed to do in Pakistan for the Americans." His former probation officer, Luis Caso, told the paper: "All I knew was the D.E.A. wanted him in Pakistan as fast as possible because they said they were close to making some big cases." The *Times* notes that the transcript of the probation hearing "shows the government took great pains not to identify which agency was handling Mr. Headley, or whether he worked for more than one," though both the CIA and the FBI denied that Headley had ever worked for them. The transcript also indicates that the government was in a hurry to get him shipped off to Pakistan, and, in fact, he was on his way the next month.

By February 2002 Headley had begun training with the terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba. The *Times* continues:

Between 2002 and 2005, Mr. Headley attended at least four additional Lashkar sessions, including training on surveillance and small-arms combat. Then in 2007, he began scouting targets for the group to attack in Mumbai, staying at least twice at the Taj Mahal Palace and Tower hotel, and hiring fishermen for private tours of the port that helped him identify where the sea-traveling attackers could land. It is unclear when and why his connections to the United States government ended.

What is clear is that those connections remained in place at least as late as 2003. Then two of Headley's ex-wives, according to recent reports, told American authorities between 2005 and 2008 that they believed he was involved in terrorist plots. Once again, says the paper, the warnings were "dismissed," leaving Headley free to help plan the devastating Mumbai attacks.

U.S. authorities only took Headley into custody when British intelligence informed them that Headley had been arrested in connection with a plot to attack a Danish newspaper for printing cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. Even then they had no idea he was involved in the Mumbai attacks until he offered up that information. He has since pleaded guilty to involvement in both the Mumbai and Denmark plots and "is cooperating with the authorities, this time hoping to avoid the death penalty," according to the *Times*.

The Indian government, quite understandably, believes Washington ignored the warnings about Headley's terrorist ties because he was working for both the U.S. government and Pakistani intelligence. The Obama administration investigated the case and found — surprise, surprise — that the U.S. government did nothing wrong, as the newspaper reports:

A senior United States official said the inquiry has concluded that while the government received



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warnings, it did not have strong enough evidence at the time to act on them. “Had the United States government sufficiently established he was engaged in plotting a terrorist attack in India, the information would have most assuredly been transferred promptly to the Indian government,” the official said in a statement to *The New York Times*. The statement did not make clear whether any American agencies would be held accountable.

Two lessons may be gleaned from this incident. The first is that expecting the government to prevent terrorism is like expecting an infant not to wet his diaper. The *Times* writes that the Headley episode “illustrates the breakdowns and miscommunications that have bedeviled [federal agencies] since the Sept. 11 attacks,” though the same “breakdowns and miscommunications” also *preceded* the attacks and kept the government from preventing them. Government agencies are more interested in protecting their own turf than in cooperating for the good of the people they are supposed to be serving. Creating the Department of Homeland Security with its massive new bureaucracy has not helped matters any.

The second lesson is that informants are notoriously unreliable and can usually be counted on only to engage in more crime. The FBI, for example, [used mafia leaders and hit men as informants](#) in the Boston area for over 20 years and then protected them from prosecution for crimes up to and including murder. When it comes to terrorism, informants are no better. Several of the high-profile cases of domestic terrorism that the FBI has supposedly busted since 9/11 were [instigated by the agency’s own informers](#). Perhaps worst of all, two of the 9/11 hijackers [lived with an FBI informant](#) in 2000, yet the feds still failed to catch on to the plot.

Of note also is the fact that without the unconstitutional War on Drugs, Headley would never have ended up as a federal informant in the first place and thus would never have been sent to Pakistan to plot terrorism on the American taxpayer’s dime.

The Headley case is just one more example of government incompetence that is later whitewashed by an internal investigation. It makes one wonder under what rock the remaining 25 percent of Americans who still trust the government have been living.

*Photo of Mumbai attack: AP Images*

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