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September the 11th: - two years on, the Congressional view of lessons learnt[†]

Remarkably as it seems, it has been two years already since al Qaeda executed the bloodiest terrorist attack in modern history. Almost immediately after the heinous event which saw the deaths of 3,000 innocent people of varying nationality and ethnicity in a synchronised attack against the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and over Pennsylvania, it rapidly became a cliché to state that the world had irrevocably changed. More specifically, that the United States was no longer invulnerable; that it was to follow to this day a far more unilateral foreign policy; that its citizens now live in a constant state of fear and lastly that Osama bin Laden was now the new all-defining geostrategic threat to the West. In all the column inches expended there has, however, been little agreement as to the detailed ramifications for all concerned. As a result, on the anniversary of the attack, TSM provides a summary and comment on perhaps one of the most important documents to be compiled regarding the events that led up to September 11th. Several months ago a gargantuan Top Secret report was compiled by the congressional *Joint Inquiry into the Intelligence Community Activities before and after the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001* (JICATTA-9/11). Since then, the 900 page report has been sanitised, declassified and up-dated. The following is a précis of its main findings. Whilst in places this article may surprise the reader in terms of the frankness of criticisms cited with regards to the US Intelligence Community (IC), please note that in most cases, except where obvious, TSM will be using the exact wording of the declassified report.

Structure

The Joint Inquiry was composed of the members of both the Senate and House committees on Intelligence, in total 37 congressmen and women with a 1 person majority in favour of the Republican Party. To give an idea of internal proportions, the JICATTA-9/11 dedicates no less than 120 pages to its findings alone. What follows is another 100+ pages of so-called “narrative” describing the events leading up to the attacks, including detailed descriptions of the team members and their movements in and out of the mainland US. Next comes a section which attempts to make the case specifically against Osama bin Laden as the individual ultimately responsible for the attacks and against Khalid Shaykh Mohammed as the operational mastermind behind the team that executed the suicide hijackings. Following this there is a somewhat more brief discussion of the individuals that have since been identified as associates of the team members, their European (mostly German connections) and the way in which they obtained their US visas. The next section describes how the

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threat of Osama bin Laden and his terror organisation escalated in the months and years before the attacks and represents that last point at which the structure of the report truly follows a logically cogent path. From Part Three and onwards – pages 250 to the end, (i.e. the vast majority of the JICATTA-9/11), unfortunately, whilst containing much useful information, meanders in topic without a clear guiding principle, weaving as it does from issues such as the personnel concerns of the CIA and FBI, to the question of terrorist financing, the search for Khalid Shaykh Mohammed and the barriers to communication between the IC and US law enforcement.

It should be noted that the report proper finishes at just over 400 pages. The rest of the almost 900 page report is made up not only of supporting documents and appendices but several additional views by members of the joint inquiry. Amongst these are many that represent seriously dissenting views, and / or even more critical appraisals of the IC's failure with regard to 9/11. The additional comments of Senator Richard C. Shelby, Deputy Chairman of the Senate Select Committee of Intelligence, alone run to more than 130 pages! As a result those that manage to read the report in its entirety may find it difficult to call it a coherent or homogenous one.

Findings

The following is a condensed version of those findings that were agreed upon by the plenary Joint Inquiry.

- The US IC had prior to 9/11 a large amount of intelligence as its disposal relating to bin Laden and al Qaeda activities but no specific information as to the time, place and nature of the imminent attacks (this finding, at least with reference to the issue of the nature, or method of attack is actually in contradiction with several later findings, and as such may be seen as somewhat coloured politically).
- In the Spring and Summer preceding the attacks there was a marked increase in intelligence arriving to the IC indicating an imminent attack on the mainland of the USA.
- From at least 1994 onwards the IC received information to the effect that terrorists were contemplating the use of aircraft as weapons. This information did not stimulate any specific IC assessment of this form of attack.
- The IC too often failed to focus on the aforementioned information in a fashion that appreciated its collective significance.
- The IC demonstrated a lack of initiative in coming to grips with new transnational threats.
- The National Security Agency (NSA) in particular intercepted communications by participants in the attack, connecting them to terrorist activities.
- Critical morsels of intelligence concerning key players such as Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi “lay dormant” within the IC for as long as a year and a half prior to the attacks and the CIA missed repeated opportunities to act on information regarding the two which it already had in its possession.
- The two hijackers in fact had numerous meetings with a long-time FBI counter-terrorism informant operating in California. The CIA additionally failed to forward relevant information on these individuals to the FBI, information that



- would have likely prompted the Bureau to use its informant to target the future hijackers.
- In July of 2001 an FBI agent in Phoenix electronically informed the DC headquarters of the FBI and its New York field office that Osama bin Laden was co-ordinating efforts to send students to the US for civil aviation-related training. The communication garnered “little or no interest” in either office. Likewise, mastermind Khalid Shaykh Mohammed had already been connected not only to bin Laden, but to plans to use aircraft as weapons and to terrorist activities in the US.
 - In short “the Intelligence Community failed to capitalize on both the individual and collective significance of available information that appears relevant to the events of September 11th.” It thus failed to take steps that “could have greatly enhanced its chances of uncovering and preventing” the plan to attack the US.

Whilst the document omits, naturally, much information that remains classified, it is nonetheless very frank. After arriving at such findings, it is all the more surprising that no IC leader has since been made to publicly pay the price for what in layman’s terms was a classic failure to “connect the dots,” or simply do what intelligence is meant to do.

It is laudable, however, that such a lengthy and detailed report has at last seen the light of day and the JICATTA-9/11 therefore stands as a testament to the democratic transparency of at least that part of the US IC that is scrutinised by Congress. Unfortunately the inquiry represents just one of many previous investigations executed by Congress, including the Church and Pike hearings and those surrounding events such as Watergate. Its predecessors too were often substantive but on final analysis resulted in minimal reforms being made to the IC.

A Potential “To Do” list

An unbiased reading of the report would seem to mandate concrete action on several fronts. The first is an improvement in domestic intelligence gathering and a radical restructuring and reconceptualisation of what it means to target global terrorism. The US must have one central policy for combating the likes of al Qaeda and not several different approaches and centres. The FBI must improve its technical capabilities. The work of analysts needs to be respected as much as that of operations personnel. In a related fashion, there needs to be a significant increase in IC readiness to cope with those languages most used by extremist terror groups (at the moment it has 30% coverage). The US must have one central place where all the relevant information is collected. The Department of Homeland Security seems the obvious choice but it competes with many far more established institutions. The IC must share its information more with law enforcement, which often seems better able to take on the terrorist threat on the ground. Human resources have been neglected for too long, and lastly, several constitutional issues remain unresolved, including the precise application of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA).



Despite its weaknesses, the JICATTA9/11 report has the potential to be a very significant document, should it be taken seriously. It is a sobering piece of writing, concluding as it does that “Despite intelligence reporting from 1998 through the Summer of 2001 indicating that Usama bin Laden’s (sic) terrorist network intended to strike inside the United States, the United States Government did not undertake a comprehensive effort to implement defensive measures in the United States.” We can but hope that it is as sobering to those in positions to make a change.

END

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