

Term paper on the warning signs of 9 11: could tragedy have been prevented

[War](#), [Intelligence](#)



Looking back on the actions of the major players in the United States in the weeks, months, and even years leading up to the September 11th, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, it is easy to find fault. There are frequent tales of ignored warnings, of experts speaking about the dangers of radical groups in the Middle East and being shunted to the side for other, more pressing issues. The attacks on America on September 11th, 2001 represented the largest loss of American life in a non-military related event in the course of American history (" Remembering 9/11," 2009). While mistakes were certainly made in the time leading up to the attacks, the question remains a divisive one: was there anything the American government truly could have done to stop the September 11th, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon? While there is evidence to support both sides of the debate, it seems that the American government did not do enough to heed the warnings of an attack on American soil.

In all, nearly three thousand individuals died as a result of the September 11th attacks on the United States. This includes the individuals on the planes, those killed in the buildings, the emergency rescue workers, and the hijackers themselves (" Remembering 9/11," 2009). The scope and nature of the tragedy shocked America, and caused serious problems with infrastructure, security protocol, and even the economy-- many financial institutions were shaken by the attacks, and are still only beginning to recover or are still in turmoil today (" Bush Warned of Hijackings Before 9-11," 2010).

The main mastermind of the September 11th attacks on the United States has long been considered to be Osama bin Laden (Eichenwald, 2010). He

was an extremist, living somewhere in the Middle East; however, prior to the September 11th attacks, he was not high on President Bush's priority list (Eichenwald, 2010).

According to Eichenwald (2010), " On Aug. 6, 2001, President George W. Bush received a classified review of the threats posed by Osama bin Laden and his terrorist network, Al Qaeda. That morning's ' presidential daily brief' — the top-secret document prepared by America's intelligence agencies — featured the now-infamous heading: ' Bin Laden Determined to Strike in U. S.' A few weeks later, on 9/11, Al Qaeda accomplished that goal"

(Eichenwald, 2010). If President Bush did indeed receive this memo prior to the September 11th attacks on the United States, why was he not more concerned about the potential for a terrorist attack on United States soil? Although President Bush was warned about the potential for a terrorist attack on United States soil, the memorandum that he was presented with did not contain any kind of particulars on the when, where, why or how of the attacks (Eichenwald, 2010). Although the issue could have and should have garnered more scrutiny from the President and intelligence agencies, the fact remains that until September 11th, 2001, there had been no attacks by foreign groups on American soil in many, many years (Eichenwald, 2010). The likelihood of having an attack like the September 11th attacks probably seemed quite remote and unlikely. Looking back, it is clear that President Bush and the intelligence agencies did the wrong thing by ignoring this memo-- however, in the context of the time, pushing the issue aside could have seemed like a logical thing to do.

However, some professionals disagree most readily with this assessment of

President Bush's choice to ignore the memorandum or to push it to the back burner at the time when it was presented. Eichenwald (2010) writes:

Administration officials dismissed the document's significance, saying that, despite the jaw-dropping headline, it was only an assessment of Al Qaeda's history, not a warning of the impending attack. That is, unless it was read in conjunction with the daily briefs preceding Aug. 6, the ones the Bush administration would not release. While those documents are still not public, I have read excerpts from many of them and come to an inescapable conclusion: the administration's reaction to what Mr. Bush was told in the weeks before that infamous briefing reflected significantly more negligence than has been disclosed (Eichenwald, 2010).

Eichenwald goes on to claim that most of the intelligence briefings that President Bush was presented with demonstrated that the al-Qaeda attacks were potentially "imminent" (Eichenwald, 2010). Although this does not give an exact time frame, the idea of "imminent" certainly gives the impression that the issue is pressing-- certainly not an issue to be passed over in lieu of other less important issues.

The New York Times also reported that the Bush Administration had ample warning about the potential for a terrorist attack from al-Qaeda on American soil. The New York Times claimed that "As early as the summer of 1998, sources told intelligence agencies that Osama bin Laden had plans to attack public places in New York and Washington a 1998 intelligence report stated that a source said, 'Plans to hijack U. S. aircraft proceeding well'" (Mihalopoulos, 2003). This indicates that the Bush Administration had a long history of proof that al-Qaeda was planning something to do with airports

and airplanes in the United States-- information that stemmed back to the Clinton Administration (Mihalopoulos, 2003). There was ample evidence that al-Qaeda not only had the means and the opportunity to carry off a plan of this caliber, but they also had a specific plan in place (Mihalopoulos, 2003). ABC News reported that " the [memo] said terrorists might be seeking jobs with U. S. airlines or airports and urged FBI headquarters to ' obtain visa information' on all ' individuals obtaining visas to attend these types of schools' around the country" (" Bush Warned of Hijackings Before 9-11," 2010). This sounds as though intelligence agencies had incredibly specific information regarding the potential threat, and did little or nothing to alleviate that threat.

Even today, more than a decade after the September 11th attacks on the United States, the true story of the breakdown in intelligence remains muddy. Regarding the 9-11 Commission set up by the federal government to investigate intelligence failures leading up to September 11th, Mihalopoulos (2003) writes: " FBI Director Robert Mueller told congressional investigators in June 2002 that the hijackers " contacted no known terrorist sympathizers." Confronted with evidence to the contrary at a closed appearance before the panel in October, Mueller said he " had no intent to mislead" the committee" However, it seems that the entire purpose of many of the actions of individuals involved in the Bush Administration after the September 11th attacks was to confuse and confound the investigation.

Perhaps the purpose of this was to protect national security, as many of these individuals claimed, but it seems more likely that the purpose of all the cover-up was to protect those who ignored the warning signs regarding a

potential attack from the ramifications of their lack of action.

It has been fairly well-established at this point that there was ample warning and ample time for the Bush Administration to recognize a potential terrorist threat to the United States from al-Qaeda. The question that should then be asked is who is responsible for the lack of action on the issue?

Intelligence also suggested that a high number of individuals on various watch lists were enrolling in flight schools. While this would not have been particularly worrisome on its own, intelligence also suggested that a number of potential terrorist plots involved airline hijackings (Eichenwald, 2010). This should have acted as a clue to intelligence officials and the White House that these individuals could pose a threat to America-- particularly since they were only concerned with how to fly a plane, not land one.

In addition, multiple intelligence agencies from around the world were warning the United States about a potential terrorist attack on the United States. A Jordanian man in prison even warned the government that there would be a terrorist attack on US soil very soon, a warning that the government failed to heed properly(" Bush Warned of Hijackings Before 9-11," 2010). In short, there were a number of suspicious individuals living in the United States, many of whom were known to officials, who were acting very suspiciously-- and they were ignored until it was too late.

The problem that faces the intelligence agencies of the United States is that there are very few overarching bodies that communicate freely between the agencies. This is partially due to competition between the agencies, but it is also due to the fact that these agencies deal in secrets. Individuals and groups that rely on secrets to keep people alive have a tendency to guard

their secrets and information very jealously, even from other people on “their team,” so to speak. As a result, it is common to see a breakdown in communication between the CIA and the FBI for, example (Eichenwald, 2010).

Asking whether or not the September 11th, 2001 attacks on the United States could have been avoided seems to be a moot point. The attacks occurred, and many innocent lives were lost as a result. Instead of asking whether they could have been avoided and assigning blame to the situation, it is probably more productive to look at where the system broke down, and how to solve those particular issues that exist within the system. This will help to suss out anyone with any personal culpability in the tragedy, but it will also help to fine-tune the system so that tragedies of this scope are more easily avoided in the future.

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