

The culture of terrorism in "the hunt for ksm: inside the pursuit and takedown of..."

[Society](#), [Terrorism](#)



The horrific terrorist attacks on the clear, blue-skied morning of September 11th, 2001 were nothing short of a tragedy. This simultaneous, well planned and coordinated operation targeted and destroyed symbols of American strength and global influence with hopes of promoting fear in and weakening the moral of the American people. In the aftermath, America's top agents, intelligence officers, and analysts from various agencies and organizations raced to find who was involved in the attacks. Much of the nation quickly set their sights and resources on the Sunni Islamist multinational terror and military organization al-Qaeda and their leader Osama bin Laden, which had a long history of terrorist attacks and twice publicly declared holy war and jihad against the United States.

Meanwhile, FBI agent Frank Pellegrino and former New York Port Authority detective Matthew Besheer continued their search for a man who had only been an associate to bin Laden and his terror network, yet had a defining role in the history of radical Islamist terrorism and who they believed was behind it all: Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM). In Terry McDermott and Josh Meyer's book, "The Hunt for KSM: Inside the Pursuit and Takedown of the Real 9/11 Mastermind", readers are drawn into the mission to find and apprehend the dangerous and fleeting KSM. "The Hunt for KSM" paints a picture of the world of terrorism and counterterrorism from the early 1990s to the mid 2000s while also humanizing those involved, discussing the red tape faced within the investigation, and detailing the widespread individual and collective failures of the United States' intelligence organizations.

One thing of critical note at the start of the book is that McDermott and Meyer include a map of the country of Pakistan with major cities and areas that are referenced, as well as a table differentiating people discussed between "The Hunters" and "The Hunted". This table is extremely useful throughout the book as both networks of Pellegrino, who was the KSM case officer, and KSM himself are extensive. Each name in this table comes with a little blurb; it details who the person is, and how they are connected. With KSM's network ranging from countries in the Middle East to Southeast Asia, and Pellegrino's travel to more than 30 countries over his 8 year manhunt for KSM and his personal network of agents, attorneys, analysts and officers over multiple agencies and bureaus, either network can often be difficult to either remember or put into context as the book progresses.

Furthermore, McDermott and Meyer do an outstanding job of humanizing and describing people mentioned throughout the investigation to create a feeling that the reader is in on the action as well. For instance, Pellegrino was the office's odd duck: he was quirky, and often came into the bullpen wearing jeans, sneakers, and a t-shirt. His hair was too long by FBI standards. He was rarely in the office as he always traveled while working on the KSM case. He was always late or in a hurry. He "didn't look or act like an accountant or lawyer - or an FBI agent," other agents said. Even so, he stayed busy, was dedicated, resilient, ambitious, intelligent, and knew more about KSM than anyone else. His relationship with his case partner, Matthew Besheer, or "Bash", a former New York Port Authority detective, is beautiful and touching.

Besheer was aggressive, hard-working, disciplined, but somewhat of a freelancer within his Port Authority world. “[Besheer] had more or less assigned himself to the [Joint Terrorism Task Force]. He had come over to the Trade Center the day North Tower had been bombed and never returned to his office.” Besheer felt that working on terrorism was the most important thing he could do. He did whatever was asked of him, and had a love for grunt work. He and Pellegrino got along well. They both had a unique and playful sense of humor and bonded over their height - 5 foot 8 - which was much shorter than most other agents. The reader can be found rooting for these under dogs as they travel and work long nights together, and through every missed opportunity or difficulty along the way.

Another thing Pellegrino and Besheer had in common and experienced together was the constant feeling of being looked down upon. Going against the bureau’s grain in regards to bin Laden and al-Qaeda with their investigation into KSM, they faced many roadblocks and red tape. They often had to skip levels in the chain of command for supplies, assistance, or approval to go overseas and continue investigating. They were underestimated, untrusted, and unappreciated. It can be argued that McDermott and Meyer feel that this hindered the capturing of KSM before 9/11, which could have prevented the attacks and many others. This rift creates an opportunity to shed light on the widespread individual and collective failures of the United States’ intelligence organizations. “ The Hunt for KSM” is an investigative report. It is written as a somewhat timeline of events. The book begins before and progresses towards the attacks on 9/11,

and finishes with the official manhunt and capture of KSM, what happened to him afterwards, and his tribunal hearing. Therefore, the reader knows what will happen.

This makes the book and every documented missed lead, opportunity, or mistake by the FBI and CIA evoke grueling emotions ranging from disappointment to surprise. The intelligence community, as a whole, failed immensely during the time period in which KSM was active. They lacked situational awareness, ignoring signs and even verbal statements from al-Qaeda operatives and even associates directly reaching out. They did not listen to or act upon testimonies by the terrorists of the World Trade Center and Manila Air bombings in court, even as the terrorists were eager to discuss and warn that more attacks were being planned. The CIA and FBI refused to properly work together, allowing skepticism and distrust in the other to cloud their view of what was important in completing the mission and keeping the nation safe. Fostering an unhealthy environment of egotism in the community, the FBI and CIA worked almost entirely separately and blindly, allowing those they were trying to catch easily travel, plan, finance, grow, test and act.

Although "The Hunt for KSM" spotlights the development of KSM's terror networks and al-Qaeda, it also highlights the changes made in the intelligence community during and after the decade-long manhunt for KSM. Generally, as McDermott and Meyer discuss, the FBI was more reactive and waited for things to happen, whereas the CIA was more proactive. However, when it was needed the most, no one wanted to connect the two. Poor

communication was a debilitating factor, and mistakes were so easy to see later on. Even at the end of the book, when recounting KSM's 3 year experience at CIA secret prisons known as " Black Sites", counterterrorism and " enhanced interrogation" continued to fail the our nation's frantic grasp for worthy intelligence. KSM was wickedly smart, personable, confident and careful. He held his beliefs firm. KSM was deprived of sleep and food, and subjected to awful and unwavering physical and psychological abuse, which included 183 instances of waterboarding. Nonetheless, he turned his torture into a competition with the agents, learning that there was a line his torturers would not go beyond, always a time limit to the waterboarding, and that their threats to family and friends were empty.

He learned to " cooperate", speaking when he wanted to, and as noted by the CIA, he did so in great volumes. However, his tips and leads were mostly fabricated and false, sending agents on wild goose chases around the world to dead ends. The CIA was unable to know if KSM's information was believable or not. Though some of his information was correct and led to a few important arrests, KSM knew that his balance between truth and lie gave him the power to stop the sessions. McDermott and Meyer include KSM's Black Site experiences as yet another testament to how dangerous and overpowering he was to America's national security and intelligence community. KSM's behavior was a display of his raw power and brilliance, an " almost superhuman" resistance to both psychological and physical punishment, and a defiance to the strongest country in the world, giving its finest intelligence officials and agents a taste that they were not prepared for

the internal jihad and conflict against devoted Islamist extremists that was to come.

Though somewhat dry, repetitive, and hard to read during the beginning, “The Hunt for KSM: Inside the Pursuit and Takedown of the Real 9/11 Mastermind” is an essential read for students in the intelligence field to understand the culture and processes of terrorism and counterterrorism from the early 1990s to the mid 2000s, where it was arguably needed most. McDermott and Meyer may dissatisfied and frustrate the reader at times by leaving ends untied and leads untraced, though the book remains extremely interesting, compelling, and truly a prized piece of investigative reporting accurately detailing the beginnings of the “ continued bureaucratic boondoggle that is the War on Terror.”