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Attackers Studied Mistakes in Previous Assaults

By Peter Slevin and Walter Pincus
Washington Post Staff Writers
Thursday, September 13, 2001; Page A24

Plotters of the assault on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon learned from the mistakes of their terrorist predecessors, reducing the chances of early detection and increasing the deadly effectiveness of their attack, intelligence experts said yesterday.

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Unlike earlier conspiracies foiled by an indiscreet comment or an intercepted conversation, the hijackers and their superiors launched Tuesday's coordinated attack with what appeared to be total surprise. Significant players in the intelligence community learned about the assault from television.

U.S. intelligence agencies find themselves defending their abilities in the aftermath of the deadliest terrorist assault in the country's history. Sen. Richard C. Shelby (R-Ala.), vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, said the incident demonstrates the need for a broader array of recruits familiar

with other cultures and languages.

"If we had a warning and missed it, that is a failure of intelligence, big time," Shelby said after being briefed by Attorney General John D. Ashcroft and FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III. "If we didn't have any inkling of this event, as well-planned and well-executed as it became, that's a failure, too."

Sen. Bob Graham (D-Fla.), intelligence committee chairman, said it was "premature" to say whether the failure was a result of the limitations of intelligence gathering or from people not doing their jobs. He suspects authorities did not have sources capable of penetrating the terrorist organization in the United States or abroad. He also said the group likely communicated by computer, taking advantage of "shortfalls" in the ability to intercept electronic traffic.

No group has taken responsibility for Tuesday's carnage. U.S. intelligence sources believe the attack was carried out by terrorists with ties to Osama bin Laden, a wealthy Saudi Arabian who trains and finances an array of Islamic fundamentalists. Early evidence suggests the



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participation of disciplined warriors operating in small cells -- likely communicating face-to-face and leaving few written records.

"This is the hardest target there is," said Daniel Benjamin, a former National Security Council counterterrorism specialist. "There's going to be an awful lot of witch-hunting in the weeks ahead, but it is fair to say that the intelligence community has been knocking itself out and has known that bin Laden is a major threat."

Bin Laden has been the most important target of U.S. counter-terrorism forces for years, according to CIA sources. Earlier this year, U.S. authorities warned Americans living abroad that bin Laden's network planned attacks on U.S. targets overseas.

There was a time when U.S. agencies monitored bin Laden and his associates by following the signal of his satellite telephone. As with other Middle Eastern terrorist groups, they often boasted about their intentions or their successes. About two years ago, word leaked about the bin Laden intercepts, and his phone went silent.

Not all sources have been shut down, however. After the attacks on Tuesday, intelligence officers listened to a conversation between bin Laden associates who said they had hit two targets in the United States, Sen. Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah) told reporters.

Certain details of the devastating World Trade Center assault suggest that the perpetrators of Tuesday's terror studied the flaws of 1990s conspiracies, including an attempt to destroy one of the twin towers.

A car bomb that exploded in a World Trade Center basement, killing six people, was designed to topple the 110-story buildings, Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, mastermind of the operation, told a Secret Service agent. Indeed, the operation was intended to include attacks on the United Nations headquarters, the George Washington Bridge, the Lincoln Tunnel and the New York building that housed the FBI.

"And he said that Americans would realize, if they suffered those type of casualties, that they were at war," Secret Service agent Brian G. Parr testified at Yousef's 1997 trial.

The terrorists discovered that a single van full of explosives would not bring down the skyscrapers, and they vowed to try again. Just four days after the 1993 bombing, a group calling itself the Liberation Army Fifth Battalion warned of additional attacks against American civilian and military targets.

"The American people must know that their civilians who got killed are not better than those who are getting killed by the American weapons and support," the letter said.

Investigators found a second letter on a suspect's computer that warned of violence against the World Trade Center. It read, "We promise you that the next time it will be very precise and WTC will continue to be one [of] our targets in the U.S."

A New York jury convicted Yousef of masterminding the 1993 bombing. He also was found guilty of a 1995 conspiracy to bomb a dozen airplanes and kill 4,000 passengers as they flew over the Pacific Ocean. The bombing of a Philippine Airlines jet in 1994 -- which killed one person -- was a reported test run.

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In testimony at the Yousef trial, potential terrorists learned the twin towers could withstand being hit by a Boeing 707, so they used two heavier planes Tuesday. The two hijacked planes also hit between the 40th and 70th floors, sites calculated to produce the greatest damage.

The U.S. intelligence community is concerned that terrorists are plotting a fresh attack away from Washington and New York that does not involve a hijacked airplane.

"They are not convinced it is over," said Rep. Jane Harman (D-Calif.), a ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee. A former intelligence official added: "The community believes something suspicious is going on and there is a reason for there to be more. Americans tend to let down their guard after a couple of days."

Graham said the CIA warned there was no "specific information to lead to who, where, when," but the intelligence community advised "caution for a considerable period of time."

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The weak case for military tribunals

The White House -- and Time, the New Republic and the National Review -- say dangerous information has leaked from the courts. Like what?

By Jake Tapper

873-682505331. That was Osama bin Laden's phone number. Or, at least, it was the number of a satellite phone listed for Abu Abdallah, one of bin Laden's aliases.

This information isn't difficult to obtain -- I got it from trial testimony from May 1, 2001, in United States of America vs. Usama bin Laden, et al. And that is one of the more convincing arguments in favor of President Bush's military tribunal executive order.

Writing in the National Review, Judge Robert Bork cites what happened in the trial of those responsible for the 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania that killed 224 as a "conclusive argument ... that in open trials our government would inevitably have to reveal much of our intelligence information, and about the means by which it is gathered." Bork says the prosecution in that case had to reveal that U.S. intelligence had intercepted bin Laden's satellite phone calls, that as a result bin Laden stopped using the phone, and that after this revelation, intelligence sources lost bin Laden and were therefore unaware of his fiendish plot for Sept. 11.

Also used as an argument for the secrecy of a military tribunal is a theory about whether a specific type of jetliner was chosen to destroy the World Trade Center towers Sept. 11. "Because defendants in criminal trials are entitled under the Sixth Amendment to open proceedings, any information introduced in them becomes public -- which can cause problems," wrote the New Republic's Jason Zengerle. "In the 1997 trial of Ramzi Yousef for his role in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, it was disclosed that the twin towers were engineered to withstand a direct hit from a Boeing 707 plane. Is that why the Sept. 11 hijackers used planes bigger than the 707?"

Both points make for a compelling argument. And they feed the insecure post-9/11 part of us that wants to grant the executive branch omnipotence in order to protect us. There's just one problem with these two stories, which have emerged in the media with increasing frequency as among the best reasons for supporting the privacy afforded a military tribunal -- they're demonstrably false.



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CIA: Tape likely contains al Qaeda deputy's voice

Recording threatens U.S. over Guantanamo detainees

From Pam Benson
CNN Washington Bureau
Monday, August 4, 2003 Posted: 6:32 PM EDT (2232 GMT)

WASHINGTON (CNN) -- A CIA technical analysis of an audiotape purported to have been recorded by al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri found that the voice on the tape is "most likely" his, a CIA official said.

The CIA could not determine when the recording was made.

On the tape, a man who identifies himself as al-Zawahiri says the United States and its allies will pay a "very high price" if detainees being held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, are tried in military tribunals and face the death penalty.

"We are saying to America one thing: What you saw with your eyes so far are only initial skirmishes," the voice says. "The real battle didn't start yet."

The tape was broadcast Sunday on the Dubai-based Arabic-language network Al Arabiya.

Al-Zawahiri is Osama bin Laden's closest adviser, as well as his doctor. He has made frequent appearances at bin Laden's side, usually in a trio completed by the late military committee commander Mohammed Atef, who was killed in November 2001 during an airstrike in Afghanistan.

The tape makes no mention of bin Laden. It tells those "working or cooperating" with the United States that America is too weak to protect itself or its allies.



Ayman al-Zawahiri spent three years in prison in connection with the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981.

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"The crusader America will pay a very high price for any harm that will affect any of the prisoners that they are holding," the voice says. "Those who are allies or helping America will pay the same price. Those who are handing over our brothers will pay the same price."

"We haven't identified who actually submitted the tape," Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge said Sunday on CNN's "Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer." "But [coming] from a terrorist, threatening American interests is not really surprising."

"We take the threat, and have taken [every] threat since September 11, seriously," he said.

Ridge also said al-Zawahiri and bin Laden were among the "ever-diminishing number of al Qaeda leaders who have been able to avoid apprehension to date."

"I'm confident that, as the president said, the leaders, particularly one or two, will be brought to justice," he said.

The last purported al-Zawahiri tape was released in May, just after the near-simultaneous suicide bombings in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, that killed 23 people, including nine Americans.

Investigators believe al-Zawahiri played an important role in the terrorist attacks of September 11. He is on the U.S. government's list of most-wanted terrorists because of his indictment in the 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania.

Intelligence suggests al-Zawahiri is not far from bin Laden, somewhere along the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

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