

perceived as deadlier than hijacking and therefore of greater consequence. In 1996, a presidential commission on aviation safety and security chaired by Vice President Al Gore reinforced the prevailing concern about sabotage and explosives on aircraft. The Gore Commission also flagged, as a new danger, the possibility of attack by surface-to-air missiles. Its 1997 final report did not discuss the possibility of suicide hijackings.⁵⁰

The FAA set and enforced aviation security rules, which airlines and airports were required to implement. The rules were supposed to produce a “layered” system of defense. This meant that the failure of any one layer of security would not be fatal, because additional layers would provide backup security. But each layer relevant to hijackings—intelligence, passenger prescreening, checkpoint screening, and onboard security—was seriously flawed prior to 9/11. Taken together, they did not stop any of the 9/11 hijackers from getting on board four different aircraft at three different airports.⁵¹

The FAA’s policy was to use intelligence to identify both specific plots and general threats to civil aviation security, so that the agency could develop and deploy appropriate countermeasures. The FAA’s 40-person intelligence unit was supposed to receive a broad range of intelligence data from the FBI, CIA, and other agencies so that it could make assessments about the threat to aviation. But the large volume of data contained little pertaining to the presence and activities of terrorists in the United States. For example, information on the FBI’s effort in 1998 to assess the potential use of flight training by terrorists and the Phoenix electronic communication of 2001 warning of radical Middle Easterners attending flight school were not passed to FAA headquarters. Several top FAA intelligence officials called the domestic threat picture a serious blind spot.⁵²

Moreover, the FAA’s intelligence unit did not receive much attention from the agency’s leadership. Neither Administrator Jane Garvey nor her deputy routinely reviewed daily intelligence, and what they did see was screened for them. She was unaware of a great amount of hijacking threat information from her own intelligence unit, which, in turn, was not deeply involved in the agency’s policymaking process. Historically, decisive security action took place only after a disaster had occurred or a specific plot had been discovered.⁵³

The next aviation security layer was passenger prescreening. The FAA directed air carriers not to fly individuals known to pose a “direct” threat to civil aviation. But as of 9/11, the FAA’s “no-fly” list contained the names of just 12 terrorist suspects (including 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed), even though government watchlists contained the names of many thousands of known and suspected terrorists. This astonishing mismatch existed despite the Gore Commission’s having called on the FBI and CIA four years earlier to provide terrorist watchlists to improve prescreening. The long-time chief of the FAA’s civil aviation security division testified that he was not even aware of the State Department’s TIPOFF list of known and suspected ter-