

from threat to threat to threat. . . . [T]here was not a system in place to say, 'You got to go back and do this and this and this.'" Not just the DCI but the entire executive branch needed help from Congress in addressing the questions of counterterrorism strategy and policy, looking past day-to-day concerns. Members of Congress, however, also found their time spent on such everyday matters, or in looking back to investigate mistakes, and often missed the big questions—as did the executive branch. Staff tended as well to focus on parochial considerations, seeking to add or cut funding for individual (often small) programs, instead of emphasizing comprehensive oversight projects.¹¹⁰

Fifth, on certain issues, other priorities pointed Congress in a direction that was unhelpful in meeting the threats that were emerging in the months leading up to 9/11. Committees with oversight responsibility for aviation focused overwhelmingly on airport congestion and the economic health of the airlines, not aviation security. Committees with responsibility for the INS focused on the Southwest border, not on terrorists. Justice Department officials told us that committees with responsibility for the FBI tightly restricted appropriations for improvements in information technology, in part because of concerns about the FBI's ability to manage such projects. Committees responsible for South Asia spent the decade of the 1990s imposing sanctions on Pakistan, leaving presidents with little leverage to alter Pakistan's policies before 9/11. Committees with responsibility for the Defense Department paid little heed to developing military responses to terrorism and stymied intelligence reform. All committees found themselves swamped in the minutiae of the budget process, with little time for consideration of longer-term questions, or what many members past and present told us was the proper conduct of oversight.¹¹¹

Each of these trends contributed to what can only be described as Congress's slowness and inadequacy in treating the issue of terrorism in the years before 9/11. The legislative branch adjusted little and did not restructure itself to address changing threats.¹¹² Its attention to terrorism was episodic and splintered across several committees. Congress gave little guidance to executive branch agencies, did not reform them in any significant way, and did not systematically perform oversight to identify, address, and attempt to resolve the many problems in national security and domestic agencies that became apparent in the aftermath of 9/11.

Although individual representatives and senators took significant steps, the overall level of attention in the Congress to the terrorist threat was low. We examined the number of hearings on terrorism from January 1998 to September 2001. The Senate Armed Services Committee held nine—four related to the attack on the USS *Cole*. The House Armed Services Committee also held nine, six of them by a special oversight panel on terrorism. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee and its House counterpart both held four. The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, in addition to its annual worldwide threat hearing, held eight; its House counterpart held perhaps two exclusively