

A second cause of this disparity in response is that domestic agencies did not know what to do, and no one gave them direction. Cressey told us that the CSG did not tell the agencies how to respond to the threats. He noted that the agencies that were operating overseas did not need direction on how to respond; they had experience with such threats and had a “playbook.” In contrast, the domestic agencies did not have a game plan. Neither the NSC (including the CSG) nor anyone else instructed them to create one.⁴⁵

This lack of direction was evident in the July 5 meeting with representatives from the domestic agencies. The briefing focused on overseas threats. The domestic agencies were not questioned about how they planned to address the threat and were not told what was expected of them. Indeed, as noted earlier, they were specifically told they could not issue advisories based on the briefing.⁴⁶ The domestic agencies’ limited response indicates that they did not perceive a call to action.

Clarke reflected a different perspective in an email to Rice on September 15, 2001. He summarized the steps taken by the CSG to alert domestic agencies to the possibility of an attack in the United States. Clarke concluded that domestic agencies, including the FAA, knew that the CSG believed a major al Qaeda attack was coming and could be in the United States.

Although the FAA had authority to issue security directives mandating new security procedures, none of the few that were released during the summer of 2001 increased security at checkpoints or on board aircraft. The information circulars mostly urged air carriers to “exercise prudence” and be alert. Prior to 9/11, the FAA did present a CD-ROM to air carriers and airport authorities describing the increased threat to civil aviation. The presentation mentioned the possibility of suicide hijackings but said that “fortunately, we have no indication that any group is currently thinking in that direction.”⁴⁷ The FAA conducted 27 special security briefings for specific air carriers between May 1, 2001, and September 11, 2001. Two of these briefings discussed the hijacking threat overseas. None discussed the possibility of suicide hijackings or the use of aircraft as weapons. No new security measures were instituted.⁴⁸

Rice told us she understood that the FBI had tasked its 56 U.S. field offices to increase surveillance of suspected terrorists and to reach out to informants who might have information about terrorist plots. An NSC staff document at the time describes such a tasking as having occurred in late June but does not indicate whether it was generated by the NSC or the FBI. Other than the previously described April 13 communication sent to all FBI field offices, however, the FBI could not find any record of having received such a directive. The April 13 document asking field offices to gather information on Sunni extremism did not mention any possible threat within the United States and did not order surveillance of suspected operatives. The NSC did not specify what the FBI’s directives should contain and did not review what had been issued earlier.⁴⁹