

Acting FBI Director Pickard told us that in addition to his July 19 conference call, he mentioned the heightened terrorist threat in individual calls with the special agents in charge of field offices during their annual performance review discussions. In speaking with agents around the country, we found little evidence that any such concerns had reached FBI personnel beyond the New York Field Office.⁵⁰

The head of counterterrorism at the FBI, Dale Watson, said he had many discussions about possible attacks with Cofer Black at the CIA. They had expected an attack on July 4. Watson said he felt deeply that something was going to happen. But he told us the threat information was “nebulous.” He wished he had known more. He wished he had had “500 analysts looking at Usama Bin Ladin threat information instead of two.”⁵¹

Attorney General Ashcroft was briefed by the CIA in May and by Pickard in early July about the danger. Pickard said he met with Ashcroft once a week in late June, through July, and twice in August. There is a dispute regarding Ashcroft’s interest in Pickard’s briefings about the terrorist threat situation. Pickard told us that after two such briefings Ashcroft told him that he did not want to hear about the threats anymore. Ashcroft denies Pickard’s charge. Pickard says he continued to present terrorism information during further briefings that summer, but nothing further on the “chatter” the U.S. government was receiving.⁵²

The Attorney General told us he asked Pickard whether there was intelligence about attacks in the United States and that Pickard said no. Pickard said he replied that he could not assure Ashcroft that there would be no attacks in the United States, although the reports of threats were related to overseas targets. Ashcroft said he therefore assumed the FBI was doing what it needed to do. He acknowledged that in retrospect, this was a dangerous assumption. He did not ask the FBI what it was doing in response to the threats and did not task it to take any specific action. He also did not direct the INS, then still part of the Department of Justice, to take any specific action.⁵³

In sum, the domestic agencies never mobilized in response to the threat. They did not have direction, and did not have a plan to institute. The borders were not hardened. Transportation systems were not fortified. Electronic surveillance was not targeted against a domestic threat.⁵⁴ State and local law enforcement were not marshaled to augment the FBI’s efforts. The public was not warned.

The terrorists exploited deep institutional failings within our government. The question is whether extra vigilance might have turned up an opportunity to disrupt the plot. As seen in chapter 7, al Qaeda’s operatives made mistakes. At least two such mistakes created opportunities during 2001, especially in late August.